BACHELORS' BUTTONS

THE CANDID CONFESSIONS OF A SHY BACHELOR

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BACHELORS'
BUTTONS
BY
EDWARD
BURKE

"ONE WAS NEVER MARRIED, AND
THAT'S HIS HELL; ANOTHER IS,
AND THAT'S HIS PLAGUE."

—ROBERT BURTON.

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:: OF A SHY BACHELOR ::

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TORONTO:
BELL AND COCKBURN

SECOND EDITION

LONDON AND NORWICH PRESS, LIMITED, LONDON AND NORWICH

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CHAPTER I

I AM FAVOURED OF FORTUNE

ALL the acquaintances I have, and many I didn't know I had, rush at me with the same question :

"Whatever are you going to do with it ?"

I suppose I must not complain that everybody takes it for granted, first that an old fogy like myself can have no real need of money, secondly that he will not have the vaguest idea how to get any enjoyment out of his unexpected fortune.

And yet, like every man born of woman, I have had my dreams, though I have not chosen to speak of them. Does one speak of the things lying deepest and nearest ? I suppose my answer does sound rather idiotic.

Even with men my speech is halting, and to women I dare not speak at all.

"I shall go into the country and grow things," I explain.

But the Court of Inquiry is not satisfied.

"What things ?" it demands.

A sudden vision comes to me of a garden a-quiver with many blooms, but alas ! I cannot remember the name of *one* of them. I am not learned in garden lore.

For me it is the undiscovered country, the far-off place of enchantment. I have already, however, sent for a catalogue of names, and hastily I pick it up. Two words catch my eyes. For such as I, they are entirely suitable, and yet I am foolish enough to sigh, as I murmur apologetically,

"Bachelors' Buttons."

My colleague, who happened just then to be the inquisitor, burst into a roar of laughter, "By Jove, you don't mean there's a flower called Bachelors' Buttons! Then of course you'll grow them, old man! They must have been specially invented for you! What are they like?"

I had no idea, and said so. I only knew they were suitable; I did not expect them to be beautiful.

Buller looked me up and down, and there was a scorn beyond all words in his handsome face. To become rich—and to go into the country and grow things! I had always been a fool; yet here surely was the acme of my folly!

"My God," he groaned, "over a hundred thousand pounds, and all you can think of is to go into the country and grow Bachelors' Buttons!"

I had no defence to offer.

"If it had been me . . . I should have lived, ye gods! how I should have lived! As it is I am a gay bachelor on £200 a year, and it's a damned lot of gaiety you get out of that!" He laughed bitterly. "Now you . . . it was enough for you. You never went anywhere, did anything; your books, your painting . . . it was all you asked of life! Blessed are the full for they shall be fed, but the hungry shall be sent empty away!"

He laughed again.

I felt very uncomfortable. It was true in a way, and yet not all the truth. I had regarded my lot as inevitable and to be made the best of, but I had not been happy, no, not for a day or an hour, always there had been the mirage in the desert. I, a wage-slave, had ached for freedom, and longed for beauty in Manchester of all places in the world!

Blindly I had followed my vague dreams, knowing I could never overtake them unless a miracle happened, and lo! at close on forty years of age, the miracle happened, and I had my dream within my grasp. What I should make of it remained to be proved; whether or no freedom and wealth would fill an empty heart I did not know, but I was going to find out.

All the years of my manhood had been spent in Manchester, at drudgery of an utterly uncongenial kind. I had hankered almost madly after a garden, but in Manchester it had seemed to me that nothing ever grew—save money; certainly not light, or happiness, or souls. I did not care for cities, and provincial cities I abominated. There was—in my eyes—only one town where life was possible at all, and that was London. I spent my holidays there with my brother James, because my sister-in-law willed it so, but I would have given a great deal to be allowed to wander at my own sweet will into the country. But Pansy said that what I wanted was young life and stirring up, and Pansy always knows best. Also, I think, she believed me incapable of going about the country without getting hopelessly lost. So I spent my time sitting in Hyde Park, studying human and other flowers from my unobserved corner, poking about

in old book-shops, among historic associations, and at the picture galleries. I went to concerts too, for I loved music. I had never exchanged half a dozen words with any woman, save Pansy and her daughters, been to a theatre, nor read a novel. I was the dullest old fogy who had ever lived by routine and for himself alone, not because I wished it, but because I must.

I rose at seven each day, breakfasted at eight, took classes from nine to one, had my lunch in the master's room, took classes again from two to four, another for an hour in the evening—and that was my life! The head and his wife had their own house adjoining, but Buller and I and the other bachelor masters "lived in," in a mockery called a home.

And now, not for the younger members, the brighter or sociable, but for the dullest and eldest, had the prison gates opened! I could feel how very ironical it must have seemed to those others. They had the zest of enjoyment, and I—so they imagined—had already all I asked of life.

I could not wonder that Buller railed at Fate. I could only feel very apologetic, and selfishly glad that the choice had fallen, not on the worthiest, but on the greyest, life.

My colleagues had ignored my existence as far as possible, they had mocked my dullness to my face, and being shy and sensitive, I had retired into my shell. None guessed how passionately I had wished for the friendship of my fellow-men, or how quickly I had seen that I was of those of whom nobody makes a friend, save out of pity.

"You'll be quite a swell," he went on, his eyes dwelling rather mockingly on my dingy clothes;

" but you'll have to be jolly careful, old man. You'd be an easy prey, you know."

" Careful ? "

" Women ! "

He smiled in the way I hated.

" Of course you've always run away from them," he went on.

I turned over another page of *Country Life*—I was seeking the ideal country house. " There's been nothing to run away from," I frowned.

I hate to hear women spoken of as huntresses. It is the cheap joke of cheap men. I refuse to believe that there are cheap women. Buller had a horde of women friends, and was without inward or outward respect for any of them. Indeed, his attitude towards the other sex had been more fatal to pleasant relations between us than anything else. He had never forgiven me for saying that a man who is guilty of discourtesy towards women is giving away his own class or the class of women with whom he associates. It had touched Buller a bit on the raw, I fear, for his origin was lowly, and this was one of the many ways in which he had not risen above it.

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. " But there will be," he said, " you can take my word for that, my dear Sir Galahad."

They call me " Sir Galahad " and " Don Quixote " —when they bother to call me anything. I have a great dislike of nicknames, but have tried to suffer them good-humouredly, though I do not think they have always been meant quite kindly.

" On the contrary——" I was beginning.

He did not wait for me to finish ; people seldom did,

though with the boys I kept order without an effort, which I think seemed odd to all of us. When I went away I discovered I had been liked by them, which I think seemed the oddest thing of all. There was a speech and presentation, and I was so touched that I couldn't reply at all, and Buller and the junior master sniggered openly.

"My dear fellow," he now said impatiently, "a dull, penniless schoolmaster of forty is one thing, a rich man living independently on his own place in the country another—as you will soon discover!"

"Thirty-nine," I corrected. Of course it was only the difference of a year, and it was absurd to be so sensitive. To whom did it matter whether I was fifty or a hundred? Yet thirty-nine does sound better, as I think any one of that age will agree. Forty is the plank of middle-age, and middle-age has somehow a rather ghastly sound, so that till we are compelled to walk it, we say as little of it as possible.

But Buller, himself five years away from it, preferred to call a spade a spade. "Your fortieth year then," he said. "It's all the same, but you can afford to be fifty and still young, if you are rich and a bachelor."

"I shall still be dull and plain," I said. "Money doesn't make a man—though perhaps in Manchester it is held the only standard."

I thought of some of the men money had made, and like the Pharisee thanked God I was not as those men were—without an ideal or a pleasure in life save money. I thought of the faces of many I knew as rich—callous, common, cunning, and yet stupid; Jew—and many had the mark of the Chosen People—and Gentile, there seemed curiously little to choose between

them. What was it going to profit them that they had gained their whole world, since their world was such a bare and narrow one, and lost all the richer, deeper joys of life? That they were satisfied was to me the most fatal sign of all. They sought nothing beyond the lowest plane, because their myopic eyes saw nothing, sensed no vision; for them the valley was all, the mountain top nothing.

"Hitherto you've avoided women," went on Buller.

I felt myself flushing. It was not altogether true; it was more that women had avoided me. I was such a hopelessly dull creature, with nothing whatsoever to recommend me. Then I was most painfully, agonisingly, shy, and sensitive to an absurd degree. I want so dreadfully to know women—and I daren't. Panic comes over me and I fly in confusion, cursing my own folly, but not lessening my speed. To be shy is not a happy state of affairs for any man.

"Oh, I thought you despised them!"

"*Despised* them!" I could hardly utter the words. Does one despise all the colour and beauty of a grey world because that colour and beauty is out of one's reach?

Buller was a barbarian. Even if I could have thought of a suitable retort—and I never can—I had scarcely the patience to utter it. I was thankful there would be no more Buller in my life. His rude fingers were for ever brushing the golden dust off butterfly wings. I knew what he thought of me, and he was so nearly right, that it galled unbearably. I was the dullest man that God ever made, and well-nigh the plainest. I hadn't a single thing to recommend me. I was shy to a point of idiocy, and full of laughable illusions. No

man could ever want to make friend or companion of me, and no woman to speak to me except out of pity. I was foredoomed to loneliness, and it was entirely my own fault. What right had I to ask anything else? I did not ask it, but deep down in my heart I kept on hoping for it.

I might as well have hoped for the moon. How ridiculous an optimist can be!

Buller is tall, smart, dashing. He has a handsome face and a ready tongue, two things that will take a man well-nigh anywhere in the world of women, I sometimes think. Buller has had, and continues to have, more love-affairs than are advisable, or even quite decent. But he does not get engaged. He is waiting for a woman with money.

It has always seemed to me rather a terrible thing—to marry just for money. To put the highest relationship in the lowest mart in the world, and then to ask happiness!

For a woman, alone in the world, homeless, want or drudgery ahead, to sell herself for money is pardonable—perhaps pitiable, but for a hale man it is at any time one of the unspeakable things. Buller, however, talked of it continually, and without shame.

He recurred to the subject now.

"I say, old man, living like a swell and all that, you'll get to know lots of women with a bit of their own——"

"I never get to know women——" I interrupted.

"You will now—trust 'em!"

"No!" I exclaimed in horror. "How could I!" And yet I longed to know women, nice, dainty, refined women.

"Don't be a dog in the manger. If you don't want a rich wife yourself, others do."

I said nothing. He knew I could never hope to get a wife at all, let alone one whose money would give her a wider choice than her sisters.

I remained silent. It is perhaps the one thing I am really good at. I shan't ask Buller down. I realise that I can't have friends, but neither will I have Buller-acquaintances. I am going to keep my illusions as long as I can. Since there can be nothing but dreams and illusions in my life, it behoves me to cling closer to them than a brother, and Buller is almost brutally realistic.

Talking of brothers, there is James—James whom I have cheated out of the inheritance he has looked upon as his own. He is my senior by fourteen years, and saw much more of our uncle than I ever did. He is also the popular and successful one; socially, or as a money-maker, James comes without effort to the top. The pick of everything has been his right, and yet Uncle James cut him out of his will in my favour! Not a single cent went to his godson and namesake. It scarcely seemed lawful and right.

I do not mean that my brother needs this money—far from it. He is a rich man, and his son Tom is going to be a rich man too, but it is no easier for the rich than for the poor to see money they regarded as certainly theirs going to another, and that other scarcely a worthy legatee. We had had the same chances, or almost so. I had done nothing with mine, but James had made a fortune out of his. I do not quite know how this was brought about, but James, who was poor, is now rich, and that entirely by his own exertions. I,

who was also poor, am now rich too, but entirely through the charity of another. Otherwise I should have been a beggar to the end of my days.

Our father was a retired Army officer, poor and casual, and partly Irish, which, as Pansy says severely, made it worse, "*All* Irish are thriftless, or else they aren't *really* Irish," being one of the sweeping assertions which leave her hearers speechless. James, except for his social gifts, is entirely English.

But for the lady who insisted upon being a mother to us—greatly to my terror—we should have fared ill indeed. As it was we were educated somehow. I got a scholarship—greatly to everybody's amazement!—went to Oxford, and at twenty-two years of age obtained this post in a Manchester college, where I have been for seventeen years, and where—if I were still capable—I should have been for another seventeen years had not my uncle's astonishing legacy fallen to my share.

James, as he himself put it, decided "to do things—and people—in the city." He was entirely successful. He is some £10,000 a year to the good, and somewhere, I presume, is a person or persons some £10,000 a year to the bad. It is a thought that at all times would trouble me, but at no time does it trouble James. He has a favourite adage, that "a fool and his money are soon parted," and I believe he regards it as a meritorious action to part as many fools as possible from their money.

He is fond of rattling his own, and pointing out how cleverly he uses it, always getting full value, which fools, it appears, never do.

He says I certainly shan't ; at the same time my handsome, genial brother has made no effort to part me from mine. He has pointed out instead that I should get my lawyer to reinvest each year as, of course, I shall not require to live on more than a third of my income. What on earth could such as I do with some five to six thousand a year ?

At the reading of the will to which I was summoned, he certainly looked taken back for a moment when the words " to my nephew, Edward Delland, everything of which I die possessed, because in all his life he has never asked for a thing," were read out, but he was the first to congratulate me, adding with a laugh, " It's something to be the fool of the family after all ! "

I felt called upon to apologise for my good fortune, though not to relinquish it.

" It was not, of course, for myself," said James in his rather magnificent way. " I have as much as I can spend ; if I required more, I should merely make more ; but I must own I had a feeling that it would be nice to leave, what after all is a family inheritance, to Tom."

" It will naturally make no difference to Tom," I said eagerly, " he will merely be my heir instead of yours."

James smacked me on the back. " My dear fellow, you may marry any day, though I cannot hope that you will have my good fortune."

I shivered, for in my unregenerate heart I did not altogether regard Pansy as good fortune—at least not from the point of view of a brother-in-law. Her hand had been heavy on me since she first started bringing

me up when I was a timid child of ten, and she a managing bride of twenty.

"Oh, I shall never marry!" I said feverishly.

"You confirmed old bachelor!" He laughed, not ill-pleased, I think. "Pansy says you won't too."

"Then of course I won't," I said with sinking heart, my last faint hopes vanishing. For Pansy had never been wrong in her life. She couldn't be; it was one of the impossible things. She never made a mistake, she never missed a train or mislaid a possession. When she said it was going to rain, it rained; when she spoke of sunshine, lo! the sun shone. She said it was a wonderful weather-guide she had, but I knew it was merely Pansy. For her the very stars in their courses fought, and the elements went not against her!

If she had been Canute rebuking the waves, the example would have failed. Canute might get his feet wet, but that sort of thing could not have happened to Pansy. The sea would have at once recognised that she was omnipotent. She would have said, "The sea will come no further than such and such a point." And it wouldn't!

Once I asked James if it was not sometimes a little trying to be married to one who was always right.

He thought for a moment, then said it was not so much trying as a privilege, and that he had got accustomed to it.

But she was his wife, whereas I was only her husband's brother, and I had not, even yet, been able to get accustomed. Perhaps it was my own fault. I would not recognise defeat. I had the unparalleled audacity to try now and then to circumvent her, and

to bring a certain strong fund of latent obstinacy to bear on our relations.

It is a little hard, I think, for a man of nearly forty to be treated like an incapable and tiresome child by a woman only ten years his senior, and just because I am a rather incapable and unsophisticated person I seemed to feel it all the more. I was for ever trying to escape her management, and rarely, if ever, succeeding.

To Pansy and to Pansy only, I descended to prevarication, even to lies when forced, and this is all the more annoying since I am bad at both. It is hateful and contemptible to be a liar, but it is almost more hateful, and very humiliating, to be instantly found out. Pansy makes me throughly conscious of a naked soul.

She at once dragged all my plans out of me, and had decided on the sort of house I was to buy, and where it should be situated.

She had the most sensible reasons for everything, and I'm quite sure that she was right, only I didn't happen to want to be right, I wanted to be free and happy. There is no doubt she is the most wonderful manager in the world, and James boasts that but for her his fortune would have been longer in the making. He likes her to spend his money—though he is a careful man where other people are concerned—he knows she's getting the highest value for it all the time, and I believe he would give her his head if she asked for it.

It is quite right that a husband should be prepared to give his wife his head, but I do not think it is fair to demand the same sacrifice from a mere brother-in-law. And then mine is the head of a fool, and could be of no possible value. But I am not allowed to own

it myself. I am still the helpless, foolish little boy of ten who must be saved in spite of himself. In her house there is only one word and that word is law. Married daughter of close on thirty, younger daughter, idolised son, they all know and all obey—at least outwardly.

What chance have I ?

I was terrified lest she should buy my house for me —a sensible house with a sensible garden—because I knew I could never possibly like Pansy's house. Sense, like anything else, can be, and very frequently is, overdone. It sees the thing that is there for all men's eyes, its shape, its size, its use, but of that lying below and above, it sees nothing. It cannot probe below the surface ; it can never see more than the obvious.

Pansy is so full of it that she can send cartloads of it, like coals descending through a trap-door on to your head, without missing it herself. She has performed a useful function, but you feel more crushed than grateful, and though you get up again, and struggle into the light and air, you are apt to feel more than a trifle sick.

Ingratitude, thy name is Edward Delland !

When I was commanded to go and stay at her house for my holidays it was the same. When I wanted to be in, she pointed out to me it was better for my health that I should take air and exercise ; and when I wanted to go out in the rain, she showed me how foolish it was to risk wet feet and a bad cold to look at the reflections on damp pavements. And of course, as ever, from a common-sense point of view, she was perfectly right. Only it made me happy to do the one thing, and the

other merely irritated, and after all, consciously or unconsciously, happiness—or at least pleasure—is the goal we are all seeking.

To tell the truth, my holidays had been purgatorial times. Neither James nor Pansy knew the meaning of the words shyness and diffidence, and their children took after them. Ethel could walk into a crowded room before she was grown-up without turning a hair, and make cheerful and intelligent conversation with anybody she found there, and Belle and Tom were the same. They could not understand me at all, but when they found me socially hopeless, they left me alone in that particular. When there was " company " my meals were sent to me in the school-room. I could hear the gay voices of women, long to have the courage to make their acquaintance, but I could never find it. After a bit it was taken for granted that I loved the background. I was such a confirmed old bachelor—even at thirty—such a ridiculous old fogy ! And all the time I was pining to be drawn within the magic circle, even while knowing quite well that my dullness forbade it.

The charming girl friends of my nieces were a real terror to me. They couldn't help giggling whenever I came into the room. I always acted in such a hopeless and ludicrous manner in their company.

In the end I used to lock myself in my bedroom when they appeared, unable to muster courage to face them.

I think my life in Pansy's house was more lonely than my days in the college. And now there need be no more of them ! I should have my own house, and I meant to see that it was sufficient excuse.

I came away from the reading of the will hurriedly.

I said I had a train to catch, which was true enough. I caught one too—that it was another person's train and took me to another person's destination, is neither here nor there. Pansy would have said, "I told you so." That sort of thing is impossible to her.

James saw me into my cab and wished me luck. "I wonder what you'll do with all the money," he said.

"Spend it," I answered, for I meant to. It would be such a novel and delightful experience having an income to spend.

James slapped me on the back. "By Gad, that's the smartest thing I've ever heard you say!" he exclaimed heartily. "I must tell Pansy—if I can make her believe it! But you leave the arrangements to her, old man!"

I dived into the cab without committing myself. It was the one thing of all others I determined to avoid. She had furnished my rooms for me at the college, and so sensibly that my very blood froze in horror. I sold the furniture at a loss, and refurnished according to my own ideas. I suppose it's odd that I should have ideas upon the matter of furnishing, but I have—the very strongest. I have one little accomplishment, one thing that has brought happiness into my life—a certain gift with the brush. I have kept it secret as much as possible—above all secret from Pansy. It opened for me the gates of fairyland, and through those gates one does not lead the scoffer and the blind. Often have I painted imaginary homes and imaginary interiors, furnishing in this way many a goodly mansion. Sometimes I have put a woman there too, sitting by a dainty tea-table. But her face has always been turned away, because from me the faces of women

must always be turned. It is the lesser evil ; for careless contempt is harder still to endure.

I determined for once in my life to get ahead of Pansy.

I had already seen the ideal house and garden illustrated in *Country Life*, with a sum named for which they could be bought outright. I telegraphed to the agents to secure them for me, adding that a cheque was following by next post. The lawyer, who I think was quite willing to continue to act for me, fool though I was, had said I might draw on him to any reasonable amount.

The next day I called on the London agents on my way to my very own house, and found everything most satisfactory. They gave my new home the very highest character, and I was more than ever delighted at the bargain I had secured.

To see it was to love it, and I succumbed at once. Till it was furnished, however, I could not of course live there, but there were a lot of things to see to and arrange, all of them most delightful, and a few days passed like a dream.

I even forgot Pansy.

On the third day, however, as I sat in the little inn gloating—it is the only truthful word—over numerous catalogues of all I had vainly longed in the past to buy, the fatal telegram arrived.

"Will come and settle you in. Engage rooms—Pansy."

Pride and glory and freedom dropped from me like a garment, but I swore in my desperation to be strong. For once, the first time, and possibly the last, I would stand up to Pansy !

It has sometimes seemed to me that Pansy was a singularly inappropriate name for my sister-in-law. It was scarcely a sufficiently sensible name for such a sensible person; it was indeed charming rather than sensible. It was a name so much more full of possibilities than of common-sense.

Like all intensely shy and sensitive people, I possessed those criminal things—from a common-sense point of view—called nerves, and Pansy lacerated them at times to an almost unbearable degree.

What a pity names cannot be more appropriate! Now if Pansy had been called Jemima—if that is not a spiteful thing to say—it is possible James might not have married her, and I should have had a sister-in-law who was merely charming and lovable, one who would not be constantly putting the fear of the Lord into me, one named maybe Dorothea. I could have loved a Dorothea I feel sure.

For sisters-in-law I should chose a group of names like Alice, Ethel, Fanny, Emma, Martha, Ann, because those names seem best to express the relationship to me.

For my own sisters there would be Margaret, Constance, Susan, Maude, Madeleine, Kate, and many others.

For sweetheart or wife there would first be Sophonisba, because for that name I have an unreasoning passion. I know perfectly well that if I knew a Sophonisba she would be more wonderful and perfect than all other women, and I should have to fall very terribly and absurdly in love with her. For me would be the terror, since you cannot take love back, for her the absurdity. I should be such a ridiculous spectacle in love: people would laugh at me more than ever,

and then, of course, it would be so hopeless. I suppose to the successful in life, failure—when it is not criminal—is supremely ridiculous.

Still I should have to fall in love with a Sophonisba. It is just as well that such names are well-nigh obsolete.

CHAPTER II

I FIGHT FOR MY HOME

AS I had feared. Pansy was on me before I had finished breakfast.

I do not know how she had managed it, but it was enough that she had wished it. For ordinary people trains matter: they do not go at the hours one could wish, or they go too fast or too slow, and not to the right place, stopping the station before or after, and altogether behaving in the aggravating way trains have, but for Pansy they lower their haughty crests. If she wants a train at a certain hour, the train is there. She has only to take it—it won't go without her. And what's more, it will see that she arrives at the right destination.

With me it is far otherwise. If there are ninety-nine trains impossible to miss, I miss them all. I may or may not catch the hundredth, but if I do, it will merely take me to the most inconvenient place in England. I suppose trains know when a fool is coming and behave accordingly.

"Dear me! Not breakfast surely!" exclaimed my sister-in-law in indescribable tones.

I said nothing. It was so obviously breakfast. For seventeen years I had lived by rule and regulation, never breakfasting later than eight; and on my first

day of independence I showed my liberty by ordering it at nine.

Of course I woke at seven as usual, and for a wonder longed desperately to get up, I felt more than a trifle hungry, but I determined not to be a slave to my higher self, and kept my eyes obstinately shut. For a pauper and a hireling, eight o'clock was right and regular, but could one be a gentleman of leisure before nine ?

I told myself I was not hungry, that I should enjoy having an hour's extra sleep. After a bit, however, I had to open my eyes, and propped up my watch where I could look at it every now and then, but never had time so crawled ! It did not seem to move forward at all. Had it suddenly ceased to be ?

Though it was a warm enough morning, I shivered.

Pansy would never have had such foolish, morbid thoughts. She would know her health was excellent, that she was safe in her own bed.

She certainly would not waste time theorising on the feelings of those, who, having followed some passionate desire all the days of their life, find it at last suddenly within their grasp—and in the same moment there comes the striking of their hour, disease, violence, the sinking ship, and the cup is dashed from their lips !

I wish to God I hadn't to think of such things. As I lay there watching the hand that I could swear did not move, I got very uncomfortable. It really did seem as if time had ceased to be. How could it be only seven-five !

Under the circumstances I did the best thing possible —I fell asleep. When I woke, however, that awful hand still pointed to seven-five, and I bounded

out of bed with an exclamation that did me no credit.

As I did so a clock somewhere struck nine. I drew a long breath of relief.

I also remembered in a flash that I had forgotten to wind my watch.

Of course I was disgracefully late for breakfast, and my early-rising sister-in-law found me still at it on her arrival.

Even so it appeared she had not come straight from the station ; she had put in time calling on the doctor's wife.

I suppose I must have looked my astonishment, for she was on the defensive at once.

" *All* doctor's wives," she said in her sweeping way, " are no better than touts—that is if they are any *good* as doctor's wives. Of course she would have rushed to get you, but the other might have got there first. Naturally she was delighted to receive me ! I promised you to Mrs. Heriot, Edward."

" What do you mean ? " I asked, turning pale.

" You must send for Doctor Heriot, the one with the handsome, well-dressed wife, not Doctor Grubb with the funny, insignificant one, flat as a board, and dressed anyhow. Besides, she has a daughter ; the Heriots have only boys."

I didn't see what that had to do with me, and said so.

" It has everything to do with you, Edward. Now be sure not to forget, I will write it down for you ; the moment anything goes wrong you're to send for Dr. Heriot. I promised—not in words, of course, but doctors' wives always know at once who they're going to get."

I registered a vow never to go near Dr. Heriot. Ever since I was dragged to one to have my adenoids hacked out of me by a rough and ready specimen, I have had a horror of doctors.

"There's nothing to go wrong," I said with determination.

"Your inside has never been your strong point, Edward; now you've money and leisure, you must certainly get it seen to."

It's one of the many things I have against Pansy—she is so sensible that she hasn't any delicacy or reticence. She is continually putting me to the blush, even though she is a most severely proper woman. Some thirty years back she poured vile mixtures into my shrinking interior, and ever since has alluded to that portion of my anatomy as if it was a sort of public property in which she had vested rights. I cannot tell you how I hate this method of hers. Prevarication serves me but ill. I would deceive her if I could, but nobody, not even James, who is much cleverer than I, can deceive Pansy. She rends the frail tissue of falsehood with which you seek to cover yourself, and you emerge, looking and feeling very naked indeed.

She is certainly a wonderful woman; but she is not a popular one.

"My digestion is as good as most," I persisted sullenly. As for Pansy's promise to Mrs. Heriot, I simply wasn't going to fulfil it.

I can quite understand how aggravating she must find me. She says she is never sure of me, that I can't be depended upon, that unless she is on the spot her orders aren't carried out. In a moment of

bitterness, she even called me sly and cunning and hypocritical.

"*All* men are deceitful," she once said, "but *you* have a way of wriggling out of things, Edward, that is positively pernicious."

It was true enough as far as Mrs. Heriot went.

Then why should Pansy be so eager to propitiate Mrs. Heriot? What was Mrs. Heriot to do for her in return? The more I thought of it the less I liked it.

"You've run too much to flesh," Pansy continued, "that's never a good sign."

Pansy, like the energetic and the managing, has kept the spare outlines of youth.

"James is double my weight."

"James is a fine, well-made man," was the crushing retort. "His is *all* over him, yours has gone to——"

I dropped a dish-cover with a crash, passionate resentment in my heart. Why should I be constantly reminded of my disabilities since I have no power to help them! "Fat, fair, and forty"—yes, I am them all; why not own it and be done with it?

She dropped the subject for the moment, which meant she would return to it in due time until I was conquered. Her hard, handsome face looked worried.

"This isn't at all the sort of place I should have chosen for you to settle in," she said in almost an angry tone. "They are all over the place, one at least in every house save the Heriots. It's disgraceful!" her tones grew heated. "And five at the Vicarage! Just *like* a clergyman!"

"Do you mean cats?" I asked faintly.

I have a horror of cats that is beyond words and

beyond control. At sight of one a sickening loathing comes over me. I could almost faint.

Pansy gave the snort she gives when specially exasperated. I cannot say it is elegant ; but it is very expressive.

" Never forget, Edward," she said solemnly to me, " that *all* kittens turn into cats."

I wasn't likely to forget it and said so. In a minor degree kittens were nauseating to me also.

" They look pretty and playful and harmless, but before you can turn round——"

" Don't ! " I shuddered. " What in heaven's name can anybody want with five ? What do they intend to do with them ? "

" One knows what they'll try to do with them," she said almost viciously. " A woman like that ought to be suppressed, she's nothing but a public menace. They ought to be——"

I held up my hand. " Now, Pansy, I'm not going to set traps, so you needn't suggest it," I said firmly. " I know you think traps don't matter because only animals get caught in them, and it doesn't matter how an animal suffers; indeed, you say they don't suffer much at any time, but I have never felt like that—even with cats. You had better warn the vicar's wife about them, say if they are caught trespassing in my quarters, I shall shoot them——"

" I only wish you could—by accident——"

" I'm not as bad a shot as that ! " I exclaimed with some heat.

" Sometimes I wonder if you are really as innocent as you seem, Edward; one can never be sure with men, especially old bachelors. One never knows how

to deal with one. To point out danger to children is to have them trying how dangerous it is."

She sat silent for a few minutes thinking deeply, then she looked at my belated breakfast again. "I don't like it," she said, at length; "it's almost like a symbol. Oh, Edward, are you going to relinquish all the good habits we worked so hard to make second nature to you!"

As a matter of fact I had already resolved to rise at seven; or during the summer even earlier. When the day is your employer's you have an object in shortening it as much as possible, but when it becomes your own you want to spin out its glories.

I prevaricated. "In the country it's different," I said.

I was not going to commit myself either to late or early rising if I could help it.

She bit back a sharp retort. She is always biting back sharp retorts, and it does her credit. Still if there were no sharp retorts to keep back it would be nicer still—for others. She lets plenty escape one way and another. I think it gives her a great sense of victory and virtue so to conquer herself, but if she was a weaker mortal, I should not have to fear and respect her so dreadfully.

"What have you bought so far?" she demanded.

I quailed. I had bought so much, little of which she would approve. "Well, a dog," I faltered. I had bought him from a sharp-faced little boy, who gave him the highest character, and assured me his pedigree was well-nigh priceless.

He is a perky-faced fox-terrior, though the landlord at the inn tells me that he is not quite all fox-terrier,

and he only answers to a name he shouldn't, and believes in one way only, his own, but we are excellent friends already.

"Then you weren't so mad as to buy a house on your own responsibility!" She gave a sigh of relief.

I went most frightfully red. I had, of course, bought the house, and said so.

"As a rule one enters into so many negotiations, there is so much to go thoroughly into. Would you buy a horse because the seller recommended him, without giving him a trial?"

"If I liked his shape and expression," I answered.

Pansy made an impatient sound. "So you've even entered into negotiations! Good gracious, Edward!"

I attacked the marmalade in silence. I never enter into negotiations. I merely buy or I don't buy. Neither do I need to weigh the pros and cons. I always know what I want. If I can get it, I do so at the earliest opportunity; if I can't, I go without with the best philosophy I can muster—but I don't take something I don't want in exchange.

"When did you first see it?"

"Thursday."

"But I thought you'd bought it on Wednesday!"

"I did."

"Without seeing it!" she gasped.

"The photographs were charming."

"*All* agents fake house-photographs."

"The advertisement spoke most highly of it in every way."

"*All* advertisements exaggerate to a criminal extent."

"The agent gave it the highest character when I saw it."

"*All* agents are pernicious liars; only born liars *become* house-agents. So you offered to buy it on such recommendations. How like you, Edward!"

"I have already sent the cheque. It was settled, my own property." I spoke triumphantly. "It was my possession he was praising, not his own."

"But you hadn't signed the papers."

"Does one sign papers? Now you mention it, I *do* remember writing my name to something."

"To *something!* Oh, Edward, didn't you *look!* Of course he's cheated you right and left! Heaven knows what was in that paper you signed! Oh, why didn't you send for me before?"

I hadn't sent for her at all, but I didn't like to mention it.

"It was exactly what I wanted" I said. "A—a dream come true."

"Dreams turn into nightmares" she said rather tartly. "If you have finished . . .?" She got up.

I hadn't quite, but I said I had.

We went to look over my possession. She asked me what I had paid for it. I told her. I expected protestations.

"Um," she said, "I wonder what's the matter with it. We must try and find out."

"There's nothing the matter with it," I said, with some heat. "Why should there be?"

"Because of the price," she retorted.

"Do you mean it's cheap?"

"I mean it *sounds* cheap, which is a very different

thing, Edward. *All* houses that sound cheap turn out to be the dearest in the end."

Personally I neither knew nor cared if Moss End was cheap or not. It was what I wanted, and I had the money to pay for it. I never can see what cheapness or dearness has to do with a thing.

Pansy and James, for instance, never really value a thing, however much they want it, unless it is a "bargain," and they feel they have got the best of it —which they usually do.

Pansy broke in upon my musings to ask me if I had had the drains seen to.

I said I hadn't.

She replied she had thought as much. Depend upon it, it was drains!

"Why drains?" I asked.

"It's usually drains," she said. "When a house seems cheap, depend upon it the drains are very bad indeed."

My heart leapt with pride. Had I, quite unwittingly, obtained a "bargain"?

"Drains don't show. They're covered-up things?"

She stared and sighed. "That's exactly the sort of thing you *would* say, Edward! Yes, they *are* 'covered-up things,' also breeders of germs. No doubt we are standing now in a hot-bed of typhoid, diphtheria, heaven knows what! Before we go a step further, I insist upon the sanitary inspector being sent for!"

The sanitary inspector reported the drains perfect. He had never seen such drains anywhere, he said. They were more like poems than drains. He congratulated me on picking up such a bargain. Altogether I took rather a fancy to the sanitary inspector.

"Then, of course, it's ghosts—not that I believe in such rubbish for a minute," said Pansy. She looked uneasily over her shoulder.

The sanitary inspector said nothing was farther from Moss End than ghosts. It was a comparatively new house, as I must have noticed, and in the best style of modern architecture. It was a bargain because the late owner's young wife had suddenly died there. He had been very "set on his wife."

It seemed a sufficient reason to me. "Of course under such dreadful circumstances he would have to get another house to live in," I said.

"Or another wife to live *with*," retorted Pansy. She is considered rather good at repartee, but I cannot always admire it. I didn't then.

The sanitary inspector departed. He seemed rather astonished when I shook him by the hand, and hoped he'd dine with me some night when I was settled. After a glance at Pansy, however, he said he would.

My sister-in-law hardly waited till he was out of hearing, to say severely that one did not ask sanitary inspectors to dinner.

"Why not?" I asked. "They don't spend all the day looking at drains, do they? They want dinner more than most men I should think. They have to poke drains when they go wrong, haven't they? It must be very unpleasant."

"They probably have supper or high tea," she answered impatiently. "They aren't asked to dine out with country gentlemen."

"I'm not a country gentleman yet," I returned. "I've only lived in the country for a few days, and

then at the village inn. I thought he seemed a nice, sociable sort of fellow."

"Oh, Edward!" She gave a sigh of exasperation. Then she returned to the business in hand. "Now, about furniture?"

I wanted to head her off the furnishing if I could. "Then it's really a bargain?" I said.

"It *appears* so—as yet. Probably there is something especially objectionable behind it all. Of course, you will not furnish more than a few of the rooms?"

"I'm thinking of doing so," I murmured feebly. I had already practically furnished every nook and corner.

"Let me see. You must have dining-room of course, a library, a billiard-room, I suppose—you can use it for smoking. What you want are sensible bachelor things. You can shut up the big drawing-room, or make it into the library perhaps."

"I had decided to make it into the drawing-room," I said as firmly as I could.

She stared.

"My dear Edward! What an idea! An old bachelor with a drawing-room! It would be the greatest mistake, people might think——" she stopped abruptly.

I did not care what people might think, I merely knew what I wanted. It was an ideal, an absurd illusion—so absurd that it could not possibly be explained to Pansy. I liked to think that in my house there would be the perfect drawing-room awaiting that piece of feminine perfection that in optimistic moods I liked to pretend some miracle would yet send me.

"It would be such a wild extravagance," she said.

"But I can afford wild extravagances now," I returned. "I have never been able to commit one in my life. Tom can sell off anything he doesn't like."

Pansy patted me cheerfully on the arm. "Don't be absurd; you're a young man yet. What's forty?"

"Thirty-nine," I said a little doggedly.

"Why, you're quite young after all, in spite of——" She stared at me astonished. I think my "youth" came upon her as a vast surprise.

"My figure, my hair," I added. For I am too stout, and greyer than there is any need for, perhaps inclined to grow thin on the crown. Yes, I look over forty, rather than under it—though only just under it.

"Tom——" I began again.

"Time enough to talk of Tom. All in good time, Edward, all in good time! God forbid that any child of mine should look forward to dead men's shoes!"

She spoke with emotion. I was touched, for I saw to my astonishment that in her way Pansy was fond of me.

"Sometimes I wish I wasn't such a fool," I said despondently.

Pansy struggled with the implacable conscience that would never permit the smallest lie.

"Tut, tut, Edward! What rubbish. And if you are a fool, my dear, you're a nice fool, and that is always *something*."

She had never praised me so openly before. It made me feel queerly fond of her, and much less frightened than usual.

Then she dismissed sentiment as something almost indecent, and hurriedly got back to the bone of contention.

"I brought one or two catalogues with pieces of suitable and moderate furniture marked," she began. "We can go over it together, Edward. I'm sure you'll find it a great help."

"As a matter of fact the furnishing's all settled," I blurted out. She had to know sooner or later.

She started. "*Impossible!*" she said. "Things aren't done like that!"

"I got a man to come down; he's what is called an artist in furnishing, and he deserves his name and world-wide reputation. We—we thought alike. He is a very clever young man, and knows exactly the right sort of thing, and where it's to go. We went into the paper and painting and decoration as well. They are to be put in hand to-morrow."

I do not think I had ever made so long a speech in my life. No wonder Pansy gazed at me.

"He is following out my sketches; he says one couldn't improve upon them."

The understanding and intelligence of the young man had indeed struck me as quite extraordinary. In fact I believe he was what people call a genius. He also was coming to dinner, in fact for a week-end, but I thought it better not to mention the matter to Pansy. Perhaps *he* didn't dine either.

"Who is this person?" she demanded.

"George Newlisands is his name."

"What, the Honourable George Newlisands! The fifth son of Lord Newlisands! I suppose he's taken it up for a hobby. Of course *his* taste will be all right. You were clever to think of him."

She spoke most graciously.

"Oh, he's taken it up for a livelihood. He's quite

a pauper, you know. His heart is in it, and he's lucky to be able to make a good income out of a beloved hobby. The sketches——"

"Oh, the sketches! Where did you get them?"

"I made them."

"*You!*"

"Oh, just ideas."

She seemed overcome at the thought of my possessing ideas. "Where are they?"

I said I didn't know, but I couldn't help my eyes going to the fitted cupboard in the dining-room. That's the sort of liar *I* am!

She at once went and got out the portfolio, and looked from the sketches to me. "Impossible," she murmured. "You can't have done them! They are so good."

Sometimes they had seemed rather good to me—so good that it had appeared remarkable that I should do them! I could not blame Pansy for feeling the same way about it.

"Oh!" she cried angrily, "I have no patience, no patience at all! Never to have said anything! To have been poor and obscure all those years, and with a gift like that! Couldn't you *see*—even you!—that there was money in it!"

Once or twice the fear of it had come upon me, and made me guard my secret more carefully. I am always frightened of things that have money in them. People want to buy them and take them away from you, and your balance-sheet shows nothing but money and loss. If it is books, it does not matter, the more people buy your writings the more you are pleased; the benefit is all yours, you still have the book as well as the money.

But with pictures it is different. They have passed from you for ever, beyond sight or touch, to hang on the walls of others. They mean infinitely less to the purchaser than they do to the painter. So always I had thrust the unwelcome thought from me. It would have meant selling the one thing I had to love, my own flesh and blood, my one glimpse of freedom. I could not, I could not ! I would have done it for the wants of one dear to me, but never for my own. I could do without and suffer less that way. I was a mad dreamer, and an unpractical fool, but I was happier in my folly than I could ever have been in my wisdom !

I burst into a profuse perspiration. " They were just a pastime," I said.

" They are more than that, Edward. I think they are even marketable. Still, it doesn't matter so much now, though it does seem a waste in a way. You would have had to buy a few pictures to cover the walls, and it will come cheaper to have your own framed and hung."

Imagine buying pictures just to cover one's walls ? I was grateful, however, for Pansy's suggestion, for the idea of having them framed and hung had not occurred to me.

" Did you make these interiors from furnishing art catalogues or exhibitions ? "

" They were imaginary," I confessed.

She looked at me rather curiously ; then asked me who was the woman sitting by the tea-table.

I went most frightfully red. If she had guessed that it was an imaginary wife !

" Nobody," but I only got redder.

" That is an absurd thing to say, Edward ! She —she's so alive."

"I just did it," I faltered.

I don't know whether she believed me or not, I fancy not, and later she would, I know, discuss it with James; but she let the matter rest for the time being. She is always remembering to be tactful with me. I ought to be more grateful, I know.

"Now about servants," she began.

"What about them?" I enquired fearfully.

"Do you imagine a house runs itself?"

"I hadn't thought about it at all."

"There's cooking, cleaning, waiting, and so on. What staff do you think you'll need?"

She knew perfectly well I had no more idea than a cow, and "staff" sounded very alarming. At the college we had, or so I was told—I never saw her—a matron. She, I presume, had some persons under her, the staff I conclude. In the hall was a man who used to put a lot of polish on Buller's boots and omit to do mine at all. It was nice to think I should now have blackened boots.

"You must have a housekeeper of course," she began.

"Oh, yes," I agreed vaguely.

"A sensible, managing woman."

My heart sank. I began to feel frightened of the prospective housekeeper. Sensible! Managing! Two bugbear words!

"Of course you understand, don't you?"

I said nothing. I was only too much afraid I did understand. She would be a cross between Mrs. Clive, the lady who had been a mother to me, and Pansy herself. It would be very horrible.

"You must be very careful in your position, Edward. You cannot possibly have any one young and pretty."

But I wanted some one young and pretty. She would go with the house, not spoil it, and I liked fair things to look at.

"Why not?" I said obstinately. "I'd prefer her young and pretty. Why should I be careful now? And please, Pansy, I'd like one called Ermyntrude."

"Hush, Edward, that will do!" She raised an admonishing hand, and I saw I had shocked her deeply. I could not understand it. Why should Pansy be so horrified now? She looked as if she suspected me of all manner of terrible things.

"*All* men are full of the old Adam," she said stiffly, "but we will not discuss it, *if* you please, Edward."

"Of course not," I said confused. I wondered what it was we were not to discuss.

"Never forget you are not alone in the world, that you have me and James and the poor children to think of."

I didn't say anything, but the eldest "child" is twenty-nine, and has been married for ten years.

"I know exactly the sort of woman you want, Edward, and I'm going to see that you get her. You can count on me."

"Thank you," I said faintly.

"Now there's the outside. Of course you will keep a motor-car? If so you will have to have a chauffeur. You must not think of driving yourself, Edward; you are far too absent-minded. You would run over things."

"What things?" I asked.

"Oh, deaf old men and women, and children, and cats and dogs."

"Good God!" I shuddered. The very idea made me feel a monster of iniquity. I decided not to keep a motor-car.

"Hush! Don't use such profane language. Well, there's the garden, and it needs a lot doing to it. You'll want a first-class gardener as head——"

"If I had a gardener, the garden would be his, not mine. I'm only going to have a man who gardens."

"Really, Edward, what do you mean? What's the difference?"

"All the difference in the world. I hire him daily. I tell him what I want done, instead of listening to what *he* intends doing."

"And how much do you know about gardening?" she asked with some satire.

"Nothing."

She raised her eyebrows in a way she has. It makes others look foolish; to her it is rather becoming. Her eyes and eyebrows are very handsome. "Then the blind will lead the blind?"

"No, we'll learn together. I shall make my own mistakes instead of having to suffer from the mistakes of others. There are books, and the agent said there were heaps of flowers to come up."

"Oh, the agent! *All* agents will say anything to gain a purchaser. This garden requires at least two gardeners."

"And it will have two—me and Angus." For close on forty years I had had to be grammatically correct. Now I take a pleasure in being as much otherwise as possible. Each time I say "me" for "I," one of the shackles of the past falls away.

Pansy sat up stiffly. "And pray *who* is Angus?" I could see she was all suspicion.

"The man I've engaged——"

"You can't have engaged a gardener already! Impossible!"

"A man who *gardens*," I corrected obstinately. "And it was rather he that engaged me. I was very grateful to him."

She made an impatient sound.

Angus was a Scot, though less insistent on that point than most. He had spent a great deal of his time in the locality, and had had an English mother. He was a long, lean man with a rugged face—not unhandsome—and a rather dry manner. I first saw him outside a public-house.

He asked me whom I was looking for.

It at once occurred to me that he was the very person I required, and I stated my needs carefully, duly insisting that he would only be hired daily, and in *no* sense a gardener.

"Sundays?"

"Oh no, of course not," I said.

"Then you'd be payin' for six days like, not the seven?"

"Oh no," I said again, "of course I should hire for Sunday just the same, only that day would be his holiday, you see."

He appeared to. He asked me what I had thought of paying.

I went red, for these questions are always embarassing and indelicate to me.

"I expect he'd know better than I what he was worth," I said.

He stared at me, a little suspiciously, I thought. Scratched his head and finally suggested a sum. "Mind you, the chap can work," he added.

I hadn't the vaguest idea as to the remuneration due to men who gardened, and the sum seemed small to me. I said something of the sort.

"It's a fair wage as things go," he returned—almost disagreeably, "if you're satisfied, I am. I'll start a' Monday." And so it was settled. How simple such things are, after all!

"Who *is* this Angus? Tell me all about him, Edward. Now what experience has he had?"

"I don't know," I said. "How should I? Why, I met him for the first time yesterday."

"But where? How?"

"Oh, just in the village."

"What part of the village?"

"Outside the Silver Swan."

"I thought as much! Oh, Edward, how like you!"

"I said outside, not in."

"Which means he had just come out, or was going in. *All* people one meets like that, are just going in, or have just come out."

"He met *me* there, and I was doing neither."

"Don't prevaricate, Edward! He was probably on the watch for you. I expect he asked for a week's advance."

"I offered it, but he said he had enough."

"He'll be spending all his wages on beer."

"I don't think so. He didn't strike me as that sort of man. If he takes beer, of course he'll have his glass with his meals up here."

"What next! So you didn't ask him where he had been before—not even if he was married?"

Good heavens! Who was I to pry into the private affairs of another! Because I paid a man so much a day for his physical labours was I entitled to his heart and soul?

"Certainly not," I said with some severity. "I never encourage vulgar curiosity, Pansy."

She threw up her hands. "One is tempted to give you up as hopeless!"

Why was it the devil could never prove the better man? If only she could yield just once to temptation like mere mortals!

"You will be cheated right and left," she said positively. "How much have you promised this dreadful man?"

I named the sum in trepidation. Then I waited for her to say "I told you so!"

Instead, however, she told me I was to be sure to see that he came in good time, and remained till six and did not slack at all.

Was it possible—it almost seemed so!—that Angus also was a bargain? As for overlooking any one like that, I would sooner die. I would trust to his honour; if he hadn't any it would be his loss, not mine. It seemed to me he had behaved rather nobly. I had offered him what he liked, and he hadn't taken what he liked, only what seemed to him just. I respected Angus.

I said as much to Pansy.

"He'll be sure to drink," she returned, rising from an upturned packing-case, "*all* Scotchmen do."

Pansy absolutely believes in her own sweeping

assertions. Few find nerve and quickness enough to contradict her.

" I'll come down and see the right things are put in the right places on the day," she said kindly.

" It's—the day—not settled yet." I went scarlet, as usual, but for once she didn't happen to be looking at me. The lie passed. I felt horribly proud and elated. I think all people who go through the world specially pleased with themselves must be successful and skilful liars.

" And the young man is coming to help," I added.

He had said, " Thank God there's no woman to mess about and spoil things ! "

I had not echoed his thankfulness. The one " incomparable she " was quite welcome to " spoil " things. I should probably never know she had done so.

" The homes I would have made if there hadn't been women to ruin 'em," he groaned. " All women's ideas run to cosy corners and stink of the Tottenham Court Road."

" It's no trouble at all, Edward," she said. " What day did you say ? "

I blurted out the day fixed.

" Very well, I will come by an early train. One cannot leave the thing entirely to men, though no doubt Mr. Newlisands is quite a gifted young man, but *all* men—even peer's sons—make a mess of furnishing if left too much to themselves."

I wondered what would happen when she and the young man met. It made me rather miserable to think of it. Later I wrote to the young artist and, telling him all the truth, threw myself on his mercy. He arranged to be down a day before that previously

settled. Pansy would come on the scene too late. My house would be already made, and even she would not be able to mar it.

Ere departing for the train she reminded me about Dr. Heriot.

"*All* bachelors think too much or too little of what they eat," she stated, "and it's pernicious either way."

Why should a man be considered incapable of eating the right things at the right time, because there was no wife to see that he did it? I felt a little annoyed, and made no reply.

"*All* bachelors' insides get all anyhow," were her last words as the train steamed slowly out of the station. "I made an appointment for Thursday."

I trust she will keep it. *I* have no intention of doing so.

CHAPTER III

I AM PROMOTED TO A MENAGE

WHEN Pansy found herself too late by one day, there was something approaching a scene.

"I can't understand how it happened!" she gasped.

I understood so well that I thought it better to say nothing.

"He had no right to bring everything down on the wrong day, and why didn't you telegraph me at once?"

"I—I forgot about telegrams," I faltered.

"Well, I expect it'll be pretty awful, and there'll be so much confusion that it'll take me longer than I expected to get it straight. So this is the hall?" She stared round. "How—how very luxurious, Edward!"

She said nothing about things being out of place. Indeed everything was arranged with ideal perfection.

"The drawing-room!" She gazed round with her mouth half-open, at first she could find no words. It seemed odd to discover that Pansy could be struck dumb. However, she got her words and breath at last.

"It's fit for a duchess! To have spent all that money on a place that will never be used! An old bachelor! Oh, Edward, what *will* people think!"

I hung my head and shuffled with my feet. I felt

more than ever a fool. What possible use was the drawing-room going to prove to me at any time? Where was the woman who would stoop to me? I thought of the old rosewood tea-table I had got, the exquisite china, the silver of quaint design! And there was nobody to sit there, never would be anybody!

"Well, let me see the rest of the house."

She looked at everything and said never a word, but I argued no good from it, quite the contrary. When we reached my "den" she shut the door behind her in a manner that made my heart sink lower.

She motioned me to a chair, and I sank into it, feeling very small and foolish. I came to see my folly through Pansy's eyes, and it was not an encouraging sight. In the abstract—when she had not been there—I had felt quite brave, but now my courage had slowly, but surely, oozed out of me. I was a guilty culprit facing inexorable justice.

"And now, Edward, how is this astonishing house to be explained? How are we to make it seem right to the neighbours?"

"Why astonishing?" I asked faintly. "Surely it is beautiful!"

"And what has a sober, middle-aged bachelor to do with beauty?" she demanded in a tone that froze my blood. "If you were a—a rake, a sybarite! . . . Oh, Edward, what have you done!" She almost wrung her hands. "However am I to put you right in the eyes of the world! People are bound to think things when they find out—and to say them! You have furnished every nook and corner as if you were a married man, or a gay, disreputable bachelor. In the chief bedrooms the wardrobes and fittings are all designed,

not only with a view to beauty, but with a view to women's use. It hardly seems decent. I suppose I must be thankful that you have spared me the furnishing of the nurseries; *that* would have been a scandal indeed!"

I had wanted dreadfully to furnish the nurseries, only I had lacked the courage.

A stubborn fit came over me, "I could have furnished them if I had liked," I said obstinately. "Why not!"

"Edward! As if a bachelor has things to put in them!"

"He might *want* to have the things, mightn't he?" I persisted doggedly, "and——"

"Hush, Edward, *that* will do!"

I subsided crushed.

"A most extraordinary, almost a shocking change, seems to have come over you since you got this money. I cannot understand it. To talk like that of nurseries——!"

I have never seen a young baby, though in the abstract I have loved all infants, and often thought how engaging they must be. But I only blushed before Pansy's sharp eyes.

She got up and paced the room, "everything ready for a wife to walk into! It will create such a wrong impression, make it more difficult! . . . What *is* to be done? It'll be the talk of the place, people will get all sort of ideas, take it for granted!"

"All ready for a wife to walk into!" I repeated to myself with a sigh. It was. But where was such as I to get a wife, and how? I might as well ask for the moon and be done with it.

"You know what a confirmed bachelor I am," I said miserably.

"*All* bachelors are in danger till they lie in their coffins," she returned, "and the older they get, the greater the danger. It's the very last place in the world you should have come to!"

"Why shouldn't I have come here?"

"I can only hope you'll never find out. *All* married men think they know everything about all women because they have one at home to study——"

"Does James?" . . .

"Of course James is different," she said crossly—her or hers are never included in her sweeping assertions. Thirty years of matrimony have left James and Pansy where it found them—with a very great admiration for each other. It is rather beautiful, I think, and does great credit to James. I could not have felt like that; I'm afraid I should have run away from Pansy years ago.

"*All* bachelors," she continued, "think they know all about women, because they haven't one at home to show them how wrong they are."

"But suppose——" I began.

"Hush, Edward, *that* will do! You know I never suppose such things."

I wondered what things, but one doesn't pursue a subject when Pansy closes it.

She went off in another direction. It is odd to find Pansy so inconsequent.

"Remember this, Edward, that *all* girls who look as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, aren't to be trusted. They are the worst!"

"The worst of what, and in what way?" I de-

manded with some indignation. "To me all women are wonderful and very sacred."

She looked startled. "Oh, Edward, that's the most dangerous of all points of view! As a married woman I can assure you——"

"Why as a married woman?" I asked incautiously. I could not see what that had to do with it.

"*All* married women know things," she said in a tone that should have closed the discussion.

"What things?" I persisted obstinately.

"That will do, Edward!"

Beyond such a tone and look I had no appeal. Indeed I felt as if I had been guilty of bad taste, almost indelicacy.

"Old bachelors have ideas about maiden modesty and dewy innocence and all that exploded stuff," she went on. "It simply isn't done now; it doesn't pay. They go straight to the business in hand without any waiting, or any drawing back either. *All* girls know more than you think. Dewy innocence! Rubbish!"

It was rubbish I intended to believe in, and I said as much.

"That's you all over, Edward. Your head in the clouds——"

"Better than in the gutter!" I said a trifle sharply.

She drew herself up. "Really, Edward, you have a most unfortunate way of expressing yourself. I don't mean they know *everything*—how could they? I only mean they know too much. Of course it is entirely their mother's fault, leaving all sorts of books lying about. Now I always keep that kind locked up in my desk."

I wondered what she wanted with them at all. I was

also compelled to remember my niece Bella, a somewhat disconcerting girl of eighteen at the time I am referring to. I had surprised her sitting hurriedly on a book at my entrance, but when she saw me she had pulled it out, and at once become deeply engrossed in its pages.

"I thought it was mother," she said. "It's one of those she keeps locked up in her desk. So useful, because then you *always* know where to go for a little hot stuff—when you happen to have a key that fits. This is pretty well the limit! I must say I am surprised at mother—a respectable married woman too!" She had giggled wildly here, and gone on to add, "I suppose if I did my duty I'd speak seriously to her about it, or give the pater a tip to supervise her reading. My word! Fancy passing that now!" She was hanging over the book. "What next I wonder!"

She turned over a page to see.

When she had temporarily departed, I fished out the book from under the cushion and looked at it. I read a few pages with horror—I went hot at the thought of them now. True, they left a good deal to the imagination, but it was the worst sort of imagination; only some one very innocent indeed could miss it. I felt sure Bella had not. She had been eighteen then, she was five-and-twenty now. Would there be anything she did not know?

"Perhaps it would be as well a certain amount of knowledge should be derived from a decent source," I said.

"Really, Edward, what an idea! I am surprised at you! Most certainly not! I am thankful to know," she went on proudly, "that in all the essentials of life, *my* unmarried daughters are entirely ignorant."

"Isn't that confounding ignorance with innocence, and isn't it rather a different matter?" I ventured.

Pansy stiffened. "I am amazed you should discuss such things with me!"

"How *is* Bella?" I asked hastily.

"Oh, very well. I have every hope she will marry as well as Ethel. She is very much admired."

"And Ethel?"

During the ten years of her marriage Ethel has made me a great-uncle more than once, but I seemed not to have heard of any new nephew or niece recently. She married a wealthy young stockbroker and is rich and happy.

"Oh, flourishing, and Vivien too. A dear fellow!"

"How many children has she now?"

"Three."

"But when I asked ages ago there were three," I said stupidly. "Are you *sure* there isn't another? There always *used* to be when I enquired."

"There will never be more than three," said Pansy, in a tone so decided, I could only stare at her with my mouth open. Of course she was always right. I knew that, and yet was she entirely Providence? Was there no other god but she?

"But—but's she only nine-and-twenty," I stammered.

"That will do, Edward! You are singularly indelicate to-day. I cannot understand it. It makes me very uneasy. One can be a lady on three, one can't on four. Ethel knows my ideas on the subject. There will never be four."

I digested this in silence. It seemed rather a strange test of gentility to my way of thinking, but then

fashions were for ever changing, and people often told me I had not moved with the times. I remembered, however, a certain Lady Jellaby whom my sister-in-law held up as an oracle as the " Correct Thing," and I remembered that she had four. Yet Pansy thought her very much a lady, as I happened to know, and had been delighted to get on her visiting list.

It was extremely puzzling.

" But Lady Jellaby has four," I said boldly.

Pansy frowned. I could see my insistence annoyed her. " It's different when it's heirs," she said.

" I see ! " But I didn't. I don't know that I even wanted to.

" It isn't nice for old bachelors to think of such things, let alone discuss them," she said frigidly. " I did not know you were so coarse, Edward, though of course *all* men are coarse."

" Oh, surely not ! " I burst out.

" All ! Now about the housekeeper I've got for you. Her name is Mrs. Perkins."

It sounded very different to Ermyntrude. " Yes ? " I said depressedly.

" She's coming on Monday, bringing her own picked staff. You will find her everything I promised, Edward ; managing, sensible, economical. She will stand no nonsense."

" Won't she ? " I asked feebly ? I was already terrified of Mrs. Perkins. My house seemed shadowed by her ominous presence. I thought of Monday as Black Monday indeed, but I felt there was nothing for it but endurance. Pansy knew best.

CHAPTER IV

I FIND MRS. PERKINS ALL—AND MORE THAN—PANSY PROMISED

OF course I could not inhabit an empty house, even *I* had that much sense. Until Monday there was nothing for it but to remain at the inn, as far as sleeping and eating went. The rest of the time, however, Angus and I spent in the garden deciding what was to be done. We thought we'd start the digging first. It was a straightforward sort of thing to do, and somehow I had a hankering after digging. Angus had it too. Fortunately there was enough for both—at least for some time to come.

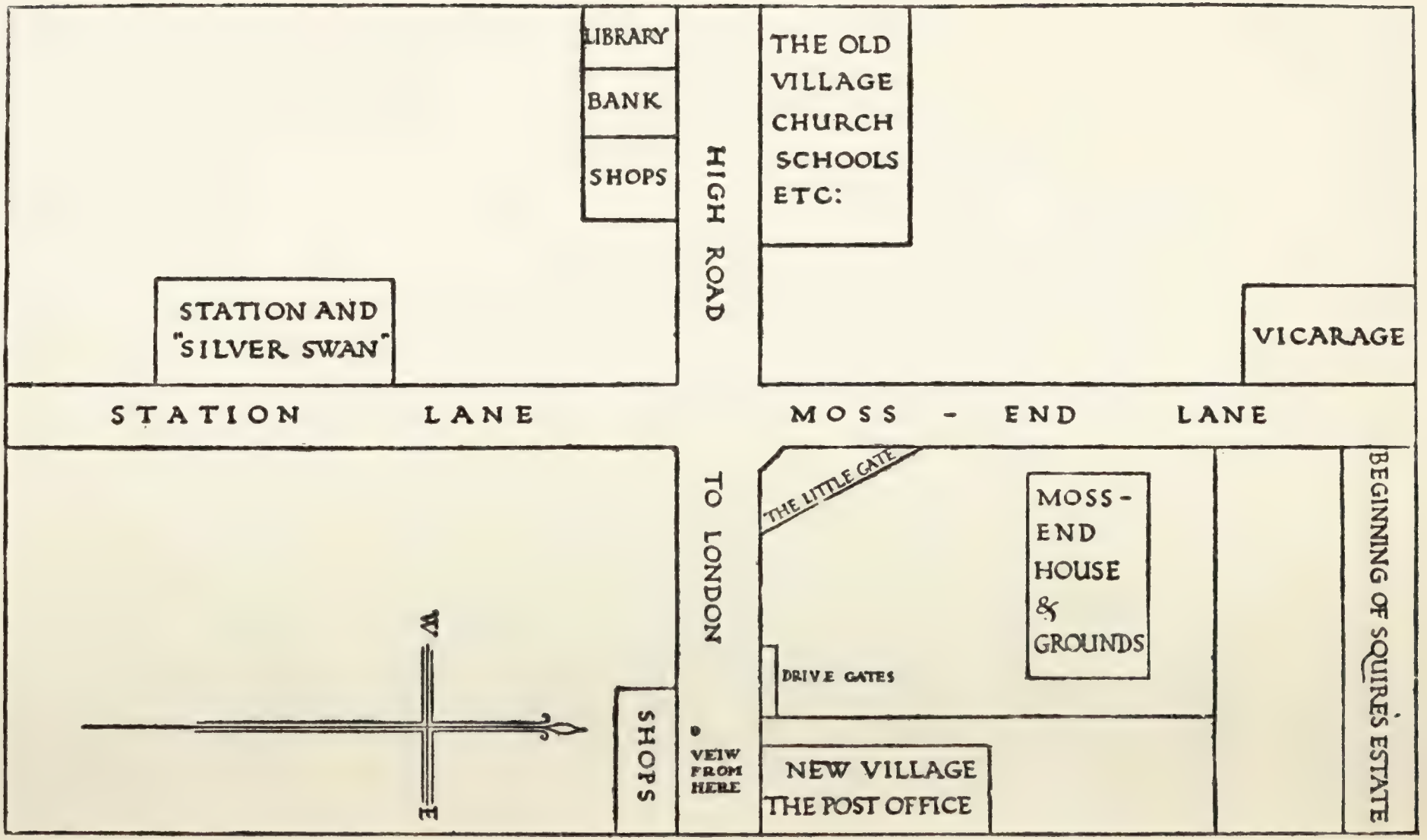
Angus and I get on splendidly. He doesn't talk much, but when he does it is usually to the point, and he has a vast store of amusing stories.

He is not married. He volunteered the statement himself.

I said I was sorry to hear it.

He stared at me, and then said it was more than he was. He hadn't, so he added, "special much" to thank God for, but he thanked Him for that. He said that, look at it what way you liked, women were a mistake. He is also very insular, and thinks foreigners have no right to exist.

I rather dislike insularity, and I remonstrated with


LIBRARY
BANK
SHOPS
HIGH ROAD
THE OLD VILLAGE CHURCH SCHOOLS ETC:
STATION AND "SILVER SWAN"
VICARAGE
STATION LANE
MOSS - END LANE
THE LITTLE GATE
MOSS-END HOUSE & GROUNDS
DRIVE GATES
BEGINNING OF SQUIRE'S ESTATE
TO LONDON
W
E
SHOPS
VEIW FROM HERE
NEW VILLAGE
THE POST OFFICE

Angus. I pointed out that we all came from the same fount, so to speak.

Angus scratched his head and spat into a flower-bed —an unpleasing habit of his—and then made a remark that left me breathless.

He sought to make excuses for Him who had created mankind. "The A'Mighty made us Britishers av course," he said, "made *us* with His eyes open so to speak, but I've alluys felt as how when it came to foreigners, He wasn't looking what He was doing."

"Angus!" I gasped.

"That's how *I* feels about it, sir," he repeated obstinately. "He just wasn't noticin'. Av course He seed quick enough what a narsty accident it was, but it couldn't be helped, they couldn't be *un*made. He just 'ad to leave them there for us Britishers to conquer, an' we've mostly done it, sir, we've mostly done it!"

I changed the subject, and decided not to argue with Angus.

I told him I had decided to take up my position and work by the little gate looking out on the four roads. Here I could see everybody as they passed, without myself being seen, if I remembered to keep well behind the high hedges. I have a great interest in my fellow-men—and women—but I shrink from their interest in me. I do not like being looked at, I become all at once conscious of my many disabilities and their disappointment.

If you will look at the diagram I have roughly drawn to show the position of my gate, you will understand that nobody can shop, or go to the post-office, the bank, the station, the church, indeed go anywhere at all, without coming under my gaze.

It is by the little gate I am going to sow or plant, or whatever it is you *do* do, the Bachelors' Buttons.

The other day in the post-office, where the post-mistress gazed at me with a truly fearful interest, I had rather a painful encounter. Just as I was getting my stamps and waiting for change, a big, stout, well-dressed woman walked in. In her hand she carried an envelope that looked as if it contained an MS. or something of that sort, something at least equivalent to some pages of this diary I am writing to fill up empty hours. It had no stamps, and she laid it down on the counter while she bought some. I could not help seeing the address and starting a little. It was going to Pansy!

Then the lady looked at me and smiled very graciously.

"You are Mr. Delland, of course? Allow me to be one of the first to welcome a stranger to our midst. I feel I know your sister-in-law quite well."

I edged towards the door, my face most frightfully red. It did not matter about my change, though I had laid down a sovereign to pay for the stamps. The post-mistress seemed far too interested to find it all at once. She was looking at us and smiling in a sociable manner. It was all very kindly meant, but it terrified me.

"I am Mrs. Heriot," said the lady, smiling more than ever.

"Oh, are you?" I said blankly, and felt myself turn pale.

Pansy had promised me to her. Was she going to claim me there and then? How was I to escape? She had moved and was between me and the door.

"How charming Mrs. Delland is, isn't she?"

"Is she?" I gasped astonished. "Oh, yes, of course!"

I made another effort to get by. But the passage-way was very small, she was a fine woman, and of course I am rather substantial myself. I was trapped, and I knew it.

"We were all longing to have some one nice and sociable at Moss End, and feel really grateful to you for coming."

I writhed. In no sense was I nice or sociable. I should disappoint everybody most frightfully. I was too embarrassed to reply at all.

"Mrs. Delland tells me you have never lived in the country at all. I do hope you'll like it. I hope you won't find us too rural for words. Perhaps you will think some of our country customs strange." She moved a little.

"Not at all!" I stammered wildly, and made a frantic spurt for the door. I had almost reached it when the post-mistress' shocked voice called to me, "Oh, sir, your change!"

There were nineteen shillings on the counter, but to get it I had to go close to Mrs. Heriot.

"Oh—I—I never wait for change," I stammered, and this time I succeeded in making a hurried exit. I decided that the post-office was too public a place for me, and altogether too sociable. In the future I would send Angus.

The post-mistress, however, panted out after me and caught me up, thrusting the change into my hand. Mrs. Heriot stood at the door—still smiling—watching the pursuit.

As the two ladies got together again, both laughed and I thought I heard Mrs. Heriot say, " A recluse indeed, eccentric to say the least of it ! "

So already she knew all about me, and my character had gone before me.

On Monday I spent my entire day at the Silver Swan to avoid the coming of Mrs. Perkins and staff. I hoped to get in late without being noticed. Angus was to report to me when the coast was clear.

By eleven o'clock it was natural to suppose my housekeeper had gone to bed, but I found her waiting up for me with rather a martyred expression. She was tall and thin and very severe-looking. She looked at me with disapproval before which I wilted away to nothing. I found myself apologising abjectly for not being there to receive her.

" I—I had business at the Silver Swan," I said.

She looked at the clock, " Closing time, sir, I see," and there was something very peculiar indeed in her manner. " It's not what I've been accustomed to." She said no more, and I heard my own voice saying weakly that it should not happen again.

I went to bed in a state of combined misery and terror. Mrs. Perkins does not fit in anywhere. She spoils the whole house, let alone the housekeeper's room, which I had designed specially for an Ermyntrude, young and pretty, and not for a Mrs. Perkins at all. The other servants are little better and equally disapproving. I simply dare not use my house at all. I am always slinking about like a thief in the night. It is most unpleasant. When Mrs. Perkins speaks to me I drop whatever I am carrying and start violently. My nerves are literally going to pieces.

I have not had the sanitary inspector or the young man who furnishes to dinner yet; I have had to put them off with futile excuses. Mrs. Perkins is not a sociable or hospitable sort of woman. She would not welcome them I feel sure, and possibly she would be rude to them, or frighten them as much as she frightens me.

I think she is the most managing woman that ever was born, and I have known Pansy and Mrs. Clive. She manages everything, including me. True, she has not succeeded with Angus, who is the bravest and cleverest man I've ever met. He not only said what he thought of her, but he said it to her face.

She has the most disconcerting way of looking at you. It makes you feel infinitely less than a worm. So that she shan't look at me, I've taken to hiding, but it hasn't been much use. She just finds me, which makes me look a bigger fool than ever, and, of course, quite in the wrong, and opens fire with some complaint about somebody or something.

She's the sort of woman who would complain in heaven. Of me she openly complains to my face. It's not what she's been accustomed to, and she tells me so daily.

Angus says, " Give 'em an inch, they take an ell," and " not to give in," that she's just trying how far she can go. But Angus is a hero, and there's nothing heroic about me. He is also Scotch—or partly so—and perhaps that helps.

I suppose I am erratic in a way. I like my meals when I am really hungry, and not just because they are ready. Sometimes I get very hungry indeed, because I am too frightened to face Mrs. Perkins after

I find that I've forgotten all about my meals. I snatch something at the Silver Swan, and don't come home till closing time, when she should be in bed, but never is.

The last time this occurred she asked me if I'd like the boot-boy to help me upstairs.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it's usual," she returned haughtily.

In the morning she told me again it was not what she had been accustomed to, though she had been in the highest families.

"Then why not go *back* to the highest families?" I suggested, trembling with hope.

She looked at me very sharply, and said that once she had given her word to oblige she liked to keep it. She was quite polite to me for a day or two.

Then alas! I forgot and muddied the carpet again and left my spade—where I like it—handy in the hall.

She pointed out the muddy foot-marks, and what a lot of extra work it made, and how it was so bad for the carpets, and locked the spade up in the tool-house. I am more miserable than I can say. If only there was some way out! I feel so desperate I could dare anything.

In fact I am almost deciding to run away.

CHAPTER V

THE GENIUS OF ANGUS SUGGESTS A SOLUTION

BEFORE actually running away, however, I told Angus of my intention. I told him everything. Angus understands me quite wonderfully.

"And I don't want to run away," I added, "after all it *is* my house in a way."

"Boot her out," he said decidedly. "Give her notice."

"Notice? What's that?"

"It's what you give servants when you have the mind to get rid of them."

"*Can* you get rid of them?" I gasped hopefully. Certainly I had the mind. "I thought housekeepers were permanent sort of things." It has always seemed to me that the disagreeables of this life are permanent.

"Course—if you give 'em notices, sir."

"And where can I buy the notices to give them?"

"It isn't buyin', it's just tellin' to go. You says, 'You here, Mary Jane, or whatever your name is, you hook it this day month, see?' and there you are, sir!"

"Oh, I couldn't," I groaned despairingly, "it sounds so dreadfully personal, and so rude. And I don't know her Christian name, and wouldn't take the

liberty of using it, if I did, and what if they wouldn't go? I'm sure *she* won't."

"They have to, it's the law. You can fetch in the police."

I shuddered. I had no idea that domestic matters involved notices and police. As for giving notice, I would sooner have attempted to fly. One look from Mrs. Perkins, and I should be at her feet abjectly imploring her to stay, saying I had only been joking. I said as much to Angus.

But that wonderful man wasn't beaten yet. He determined to get me out of the hole somehow.

"Do it in writin'," he said. "You bring paper and envelopes here, and I'll help you. I was a fair scholard in my time. If you want 'em to go at once, you can make 'em clear by givin' em a month's wages instead of notice."

"It sounds too good to be true!" I cried fearfully. "A month's wages; they shall have a year's, anything——"

Angus eyed me with horror. "Now don't you go a-scatterin' money like that, sir! You tell me what you give 'em, and we'll work it out atween us. I was a fair nailer for sums in me time."

I had no idea what I gave them, but remembered that Pansy had entered it in a little book. She is always entering things in little books. At home she must have hundreds. It would be very confusing to anybody but Pansy, who always puts the right things in the right little books, and never takes up the one she doesn't want. There are several put away in my desk which I have never looked at, and I brought them all out to Angus, who at once found the right one.

We did sums on paper, and I added a little to the total. Then Angus helped me to write the notices, one for each servant, as well as one for Mrs. Perkins. It took us the best part of the day. They read a little rude and violent to me. I don't like to write to women in such a fashion. It makes me feel horribly ashamed of myself. I ask Angus if I mayn't add something to make them sound nicer.

Angus became very caustic. "Of course you can give Mrs. Perkins your love, sir, if you like—and don't mind a breach."

"A—a breach—of confidence?" I enquired. The whole etiquette is so muddling.

"No, sir—of promise!"

"Good gracious!" I gasped. I didn't add my love.

Then I wondered where I was to put Mrs. Perkins' notice. It must be somewhere where she would find it at once. What about posting it? But then I have to open the bag and hand out the letters each morning. They would never get handed out. I had to ask Angus again.

"Is there a lookin'-glass in the housekeeper's room?"

I said there was.

"Then put it there."

"But will she be sure to find it?"

"Ay, she'll find it." He took up his spade and departed with a sigh of relief. Like me, he finds digging the lesser evil.

I decided to put the notes out when the household should be in bed. They would be discovered in the morning. I would be out before anybody was down, and not return till the house was empty.

As I locked them away, however, for the time being, I found a telegram awaiting me. It was from Pansy. She was coming down to lunch, and to see that I was quite comfortable. She had already started, so I couldn't telegraph some excuse to stop her—not that it would have stopped her, I expect. She always telegraphs after she has started. Perhaps it's the secret of her success in life.

Mrs. Perkins has quite a different face for Pansy than for me. Pansy isn't in the least awed, indeed she is very much mistress of the situation. She is a wonderful woman. We had a delicious luncheon. I had not tasted such a meal for ages.

"I am very pleased with Mrs. Perkins," she announced genially.

It was not for me to say I am not, so I said nothing.

"It's not only her sense, her management; but her high principles, Edward."

"Has she high principles?" I asked faintly.

"Of course she has! Surely even you must have noticed something!"

"I have noticed *something*," I mumbled, "but I didn't know it was high principles." I had only known it was very unpleasant.

"That woman would put duty before everything. Such women are rare, Edward."

I hoped so.

"So conscientious! Everything running on oiled wheels!"

I don't want things to run on oiled wheels. I just want to be comfortable, and have my meals when I like, and smoke where I please. I wonder what Pansy would say if she knew the dark plot in my mind. Ere

midnight the fell deed would be done! Next day I should be free of the high principles of Mrs. Perkins, and a happy man once more. I should belong to myself and not to my tyrannical housekeeper.

"You know, Edward, you represent a great temptation to a woman!"

"Good God!" I leapt from my seat in horror and amazement.

"Hush, Edward! Don't be so absurd!" Pansy had reddened. "I don't mean in *that* way—very *far* from it!"

I began to wish she had meant it in that way.

"To a woman like Mrs. Perkins, I meant."

Mrs. Perkins is grim-faced and fifty. It was no compliment.

"Don't you see what I mean? She is in a position of great trust, great temptation even, for you *ask* to be cheated, and never know the difference; but for her high principles she might have feathered her own nest, and one has only to talk with her, and hear of her excellent church-principles to know that such a thing is a sheer impossibility. You are very lucky, Edward."

I remained silent.

"You will remember your position, Edward, you will be circumspect?" She looked at me anxiously.

"My position!" I exclaimed, astonished. "I did not know I had one!" I wondered what she meant by being circumspect.

"My dear Edward, Moss End comes next to the Hall in importance; all the other people live in horrid little villa-houses, or are professional or something. You will have to be *very* circumspect indeed."

"Very well," I promised, bewildered, though what

the size of the house one lived in had to do with it, I had no idea.

"There's Mrs. Kearness——" she paused, looking worried.

"Who is Mrs. Kearness?"

"The vicar's wife."

I shuddered. I am frightened of all women, but of vicars' wives I am even more than frightened. It's almost as bad as the cats. Mrs. Clive had shown me how very awful a vicar's wife could be.

"Depend upon it that woman will know what you have for your meals, your income to a penny, the very number of the buttons on your waistcoat!" She spoke almost passionately.

"Good gracious!" I gasped.

"*All* clergymen's wives know more than their prayers," she added gloomily.

"What interest can it be to her, my meals, my—my buttons"—I coloured as I spoke—"my income?"

"That you own Moss End and have something like five thousand three hundred a year? Oh, none at all!" she laughed, but not very pleasantly.

"Is that my income?" I asked, interested. "I did not know."

"Oh, *Edward!*" Pansy has a way of her own of saying, "Oh, Edward!" sometimes there is mere exasperation in it, as now, sometimes anger or amazement, sometimes even tears.

"Of course she'll want money for charities," I said, trying to think out how it could be conveyed to her without our meeting. Could I send a cheque now and then, for instance, by Angus? "And would rather I

had much than little, and perhaps for my own sake too——"

"*All* charities of vicars' wives with five begin at home," said Pansy in a grim way. "Edward, promise me you will be careful! Of course the vicar will call, perhaps she will call with him."

"I shall hide when they come," I said, breaking out into a profuse perspiration.

I expected Pansy to point out how foolish and undignified of me it would be to hide, but she only smiled quite kindly, and said I was an absurd old dear.

"Do you know that woman has brought five grown-up daughters into the world?" she burst out suddenly.

I started nervously. "*What* woman?" I gasped. "Mrs. Perkins!"

"Don't be absurd, Edward, of course not! Mrs. Perkins is a most respectable woman, and think of her high principles!"

I preferred, however, not to think of them. That very night I was going to take steps to get rid of them for ever.

"Mrs. Kearness, of course," went on Pansy, "and four of them are specially trained for it, and not bad looking. Five daughters at home, it's enough to make anybody——"

"How delightful for Mrs. Kearness," I said, interested. "She need never be dull. Imagine having all that youth and beauty in her house! How pleased she must be!"

"Oh, Edward," There were tears in the exclamation. "You *will* be circumspect, won't you?"

"Of course I will."

I saw I had given the right answer, for Pansy looked delighted, and patted my hand.

"I know I can trust you," she said.

Then she looked in a little book, and said she must be getting to the station if she wanted to catch her train. She wanted to get there before it rained. It would rain before an hour was over.

Of course it did!

I felt rather a hypocrite when she congratulated me on Mrs. Perkins. All the same I did the fell deed that very night, and early the next morning was safe at the Swan Inn. I had left Angus on the premises to keep watch.

CHAPTER VI

ANGUS MAKES AN ASTONISHING ACCUSATION

IT seemed a long time before Angus arrived to report. I got horribly nervous, and couldn't eat anything. An awful thought had occurred to me. *Suppose Mrs. Perkins demands to be confronted with me!* At the mere supposition my knees knocked together. I wished I were dead or that I had never been born. When Angus came he was quite shocked by my unnerved state. In fact he went into the Silver Swan and came out with a brandy and soda, which he insisted upon my taking before he said a word.

"She's refused to go?" I said faintly when I had finished.

"They've all gone right enough, sir, but——"

"Don't keep me in suspense, Angus!" I wiped my damp face. "Are they bringing it into court or anything? Can I pay money not to be brought up?"

"Look here, sir, *you're* all right, it's they as I suspects have put themselves on the wrong side of the law. But we'll have 'em stopped at the junction and gone through by the police."

I stared at him horrified.

"How many boxes did they bring, sir? I ask you that!"

"How should I know!"

"Well, I do, I helped to unload, and I prefers to go about with my eyes skinned—bein' Scotch. They come with six, sir, and they've gone away with nine. What d'yer make of that now?"

"You mean they have borrowed three of mine out of the box-room. I have heard that women's things *never* go in."

"It wasn't women's things what went in, it was gent's——"

"But what good would my suits be to them?" I gasped. "Surely you don't mean they've borrowed my suits for their husbands and brothers?" I felt a little annoyed. I hate new clothes, and if Mrs. Perkins had taken my old ones, which seemed to me an indelicate sort of thing for a widow to do, I should have to buy and wear new ones.

"I don't think it was your clothes, sir," he said drily. I sometimes feel that Angus despises my clothes. His tone implied they weren't worth taking.

"Not my pictures?" I said in agony. It isn't stealing to take pictures and old china; it's merely collecting. Quite honourable, high-principled people can't be left alone with such things, I have heard.

Angus stared at me with his mouth open. "Gor-bless-me," he gasped at length, "what-hever would they take pictures *for*. They'd be after your *vallerbles!* It's the silver I'm scared of."

I heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, that's easily replaced," I said.

"But, sir, you can't take it like that, it's thieving, cheating, it's agin the law! We must have them

stopped at the junction, where they'll be waiting for the train and took into custody."

"Oh, no—not women! Think how dreadful for them!"

"Have you got a hinventory?"

I asked him to explain.

I thought it might be in one of the little books, and he made me accompany him into the house to see.

"My idea is we go over it together."

Angus was right as usual. It was he, not I, who discovered exactly what was missing. It was all the solid silver.

"Had you any money in the house?"

"No, I was going to the bank this morning for some."

"Well, that's a blessing. Now I'll off to the police."

But I forbade him to do any such thing, and there and then wrote out a repeat order for all the silver I had bought from a certain firm. "There, you see, I'll be none the worse," I said, "and perhaps some of them were going to be married, and were a little short of real silver; you know women like to have things nice when they're going to be married, Angus."

Angus put his head out of the window and spat into a flower-bed. I wish he wouldn't, but, of course, I can't mention a thing like that.

When he drew it in again he asked me if I had given Mrs. Perkins money each week to pay the books.

I had some vague recollection of doing so.

"Did she bring you the receipts?"

"I think she brought me some pieces of paper once or twice, but I forgot to look at them."

"Did she get the books receipted and then show you them, sir?"

I had no idea.

"You've been done in the eye; we'd better go through them books."

"Mrs. Delland says she had very high principles. I'm sure she couldn't have meant to have made this little mistake," I murmured apologetically. "Perhaps it was the boot-boy, Angus. Once I saw him putting his tongue out at me when he thought my back was turned. It must have been the boot-boy."

But Angus was armed with the books. He informed me that after the first week or so nothing had been paid. I owed all the tradespeople.

"Good gracious, what must they have thought of me!"

"I dessay they thought you might be going to do a guy. Shall I take the books round and explain? I'll find out how much we owe at each shop, and then you can write the cheques out."

Between us everything was put straight that afternoon, but I allowed no further talk of police. What would I want with a double supply of silver, as I pointed out? I think Angus thought me a fool, but he overlooked it.

"And now what's to be done?" he asked. "The house can't run itself, sir."

"Could we have all men?"

"We couldn't. There has to be a woman to look after a house proper."

"Another housekeeper?" I faltered.

He nodded.

"Do you think I might have somebody young and

pretty and kind—and—and called Ermyntrude?" I asked hopefully.

He cocked his eye at me in a most peculiar manner. Then, after rather a long pause, he said he thought I might.

"But how am I to get her?" I asked in despair.

"There's registry-offices, I have heard. You walks in and just chooses. There's a big office in Hilltown with a very good name. Couldn't you go there this afternoon and take your pick?"

"But what if I pick the wrong one?" I didn't like the idea at all. It frightened me.

"You won't," said Angus drily. "The Lord tempers the wind to the shorn lamb."

I didn't know what that had to do with it, and said so. I also commanded him, quite sternly, to be good enough not to compare me to a shorn lamb.

He apologised at once, and explained that that had not really been his meaning. "You see, sir, you have a wonderful gift for reading faces, you being such a regular gent of the world, so to speak."

I was rather flattered. I remembered, too, that Buller, in the matter of new boys, had often relied on my judgment.

I decided to take my courage in both hands, and go and pick out the right housekeeper that very day.

I had no idea what a registry-office was like, but I imagined it a sort of legal-looking place with a young man behind the counter. He would have a pen behind his ear, and ask me very kindly to step forward.

When I had stepped forward, I should be put in a place where I could see without being seen. A few

women, or many as the case might be, would be asked to file past my peep-hole—I supposed I should be given a sort of private peep-hole.

I would count them as they filed past, and remember the number of the one I had decided upon, and later tell the young man when he came to my little private-room.

He would ask me which I wanted.

I would say number five or number ten, whatever the number happened to be, and he would look it up in his book, and tell me number five's name, and what remuneration she wished me to give her, and promise that she would be delivered early and without fail.

Then a little later a cab would drive up containing—so I preferred to believe—the right housekeeper, and the deed would be done.

It really sounded almost simple, and not half so alarming as I had at first supposed.

I told Angus to see I caught a train to Hilltown, and he saw that I caught it.

I entered into that place of torment blithely enough.

CHAPTER VII

WHICH PROVES THAT A REGISTRY OFFICE IS NO PLACE FOR BACHELORS

I FOUND the place easily enough. The name was up. You were asked to push back the door and enter. I did so. Inside, however, there was no young man and no counter, only a narrow passage and two doors.

I took the one to the right. A moment later I wished I hadn't, but it was too late. I was in a roomful of women, others had entered behind me, and retreat was cut off. Before me at a desk, sat a very magnificent and severe-looking lady.

She asked me very quickly what I wanted, and some girls close by began to giggle.

"I want to get out!" I faltered.

"This is a servants' registry-office, you know."

"Yes, I know," I stammered.

"Then you *did* mean to come here?" she spoke very sharply. "You want a servant?"

More women got between me and the door.

"What are your requirements?" demanded the awful lady. I felt very much like a prisoner in the dock. I was only too ready to plead guilty in order to get out of that dreadful room.

"I'll call again—or send somebody." I went most

frightfully red, for I had no intention of calling again ; and of course when Angus heard what it was like he wouldn't go either. Indeed, I should not ask him.

" Five shillings, please," was her reply.

I handed them over readily. Perhaps now she would let me go. Apparently it was free to go in, but five shillings to go out. I would have paid a hundred. Perhaps she would tell those women to make way for me now and I would be able to escape.

But no—far from it !

She looked me up and down till I began to feel there could be nothing left of me save a tiny grease spot on the floor.

" Is it a housekeeper ? " she asked. " A bachelor establishment, perhaps ? "

It's marvellous how women guess things !

" Y-e-s, I—I suppose so," I stammered.

She looked at me rather suspiciously, I thought.

" You only *suppose* you are a bachelor, sir ? "

I wilted, " Oh yes, I am, I *am !* I beg your pardon ! I'm very sorry ! " I murmured abjectly.

More women kept coming into the room. It was literally packed. Once or twice one left, but she always came back, and usually had a little crowd with her.

She waved her hand round the room. " There are several answering to that description here. I can conscientiously recommend them, elderly, managing, sensible, economical."

I could have cried. Here I was having fallen from one fire into countless frying-pans ! They were so Mrs. Perkinish for the most part. I summoned up my courage.

" I don't want them like that," I faltered. " My

last was very high-principled indeed. She made me very uncomfortable, and went away with all my silver."

I suppose it was not a very chivalrous sort of thing to say, but I was so anxious there should be no mistake.

A murmur of shocked indignation went round the room.

"I don't want them elderly either," I went on desperately. "I want one called Ermyntrude."

"*Sir!*"

A pert, not very comely girl came up to me. "That's right, sir," she said. "That's *practically* my name."

"For shame, Martha Ann!" said somebody, and dragged her back.

"I'm afraid, sir, that unless you will let me recommend some person, you are not likely to get suited." It was the dreadful lady at the desk who spoke. "Now, any of these," she pointed to one after another, "you might question them, or if you would prefer the interview to take place in private, there is the other room."

I prefer such an interview to take place in private! The very idea paralysed me.

"Oh, no, no!" I cried frantically.

"Will you look round for yourself, then?" The lady at the desk was, I could see, beginning to lose patience.

I gazed wildly round. A pair of the sweetest, loveliest blue eyes met mine, smiled at me in an encouraging fashion, even somehow, I think, gave me a little nerve. They belonged to a young woman who was neither staring or giggling—a very pretty, well-built young woman. I pulled myself together and set my teeth. She looked like an Ermyntrude. I would have her if I could get her. I did not, for many reasons, want to have

to go back without a housekeeper. One of them was Angus.

I bowed to the pretty young woman, and then turned to the lady at the desk.

"I will take that—that lady with the blue eyes, if she will so far honour me," I said. I was proud to find my voice under control. I had not expected it. I made a gesture towards Ermyntrude.

The lady at the desk gasped, others hid their faces, some put their handkerchiefs in their mouths. There were queer sounds all round me—everything was queer, and very, very awful. I came to the conclusion that engaging servants is looked upon as a hilarious proceeding.

Ermyntrude glared round at them, and came straight up to me.

She glared afresh at the noisiest, and whispered to me not to mind them, and I minded them a *little* less with her by me facing their mirth.

"Will you please come away with me at once?" I implored her.

She hesitated, but prepared to obey.

But the lady at the desk stood up. I shall never forget the awful majesty of her "*Stop!*" I stopped and shook. Was there some more etiquette yet to go through? My nerve began to fail me utterly.

"That young woman isn't a housekeeper at all, she is entirely unsuited. She is only a general servant——"

"But she suits me, madam," said I trembling. "Will you kindly permit me——?"

"She's too young——"

"I *prefer* them young," I answered almost boldly.

" Sir, this is a respectable office ! I am a respectable woman."

I did not see why she should insist on anything so obvious. I think she was the most appallingly respectable woman I had ever seen.

Ermyntrude spoke up for me, her face reddening, but in a very becoming way, I thought. " I am ready to take the place on trial," she said defiantly. " And —I know a gentleman when I see one."

I thought it very nice of her to say that. She seemed my only refuge in a place of trouble.

The lady at the desk raised her voice, " And what about wages ? "

" Wages—of course," I said. I turned to Ermyntrude. " What—what remuneration would you wish me to give you ? " I asked.

She stared, but made no reply.

" Good Lor' ! " I distinctly heard somebody say. Surely it could not have been the Roman Empress at the desk ! But it rather disconcerted me afresh.

Then Ermyntrude looked at me. " I've only had twenty so far," she said, " but I've always been worth more."

I knew she was worth more, a great deal more, and said so. I asked her to state what she wished in that way, and I would see that it was paid.

Everybody was staring now in a dreadfully intense way, eyes almost popping out. I became redder than ever.

Ermyntrude seemed confused too. " I can cook and wait well," she said at length, " and I know the price of things and how to make a gent comfortable——"

I was delighted. " That's it—I just want to be

made comfortable. I don't want to be managed. The other one did that, it was very unpleasant. I think she had forty—and made me very uncomfortable, and then the silver was worth a hundred. If you are going to make me comfortable you ought to have double what she had, surely ? "

There was another gasp. Then Ermyntrude spoke up, and in a very firm voice:

" I will take thirty to begin with," she said. " I'm but twenty-five. If I get worth more we can see later on. I shan't cheat you, and I'd like to have a word with the old sharper that took your silver, sir. Did you get it back ? "

" Oh, I didn't try," I said hastily, " I ordered more."

There was a dead silence that made me more than ever uncomfortable. People began to crowd on me to get a better view. It was really most terrible.

Ermyntrude asked me if there would be any one else.

I told her there was what, I believe, was called a staff, but I should have to ask her to do me the favour of selecting it.

She said she would, and spoke to some of the young women present, who stopped giggling and answered her in a very respectful manner. She asked me to tell her the number of rooms the house contained, and a few other details.

" Will—will they have to wait on me ? " I asked faintly.

" You will not see them, sir. I shall wait on you myself."

I heaved a sigh of relief, and once more attempted to get out.

Again I was forestalled ! Again the lady at the desk was too much for me !

" One minute, sir ! You cannot be thinking of engaging a servant without a proper character, surely ! "

I wondered why she supposed my character improper. It seemed a little hard. I have always been a most fastidiously particular man.

" Yes, there'll be the character," said Ermyntrude, evidently agreeing with the enemy.

I felt that all was lost. " But I'm a stranger here," I faltered miserably. " There's nobody to speak for me except Angus—the man who gardens. I don't know anybody who would give me a character, and I shouldn't have the nerve to ask for it. There's my old headmaster, but he's in Manchester, and away now on his holidays, I don't know where——"

It was absolutely the truth, though I know it sounded like trying to get out of it, and almost acknowledging that I hadn't a character at all !

People seemed to think it funny that I had no character. Even the majestic being at the desk nearly swallowed her handkerchief in her vain efforts to suppress her mirth. They were not sorry, they were merely amused. It was not very womanly I thought. Ermyntrude *wanted* to laugh I could see, though she managed not to.

She turned to me with a very red face. " Just you come along of me sir " she said " we'll settle everythink else outside."

She got me somehow on the other side of the door. She was a young woman of very fine physique, and she used her elbows rather liberally. I kept close to her. I could not, of course, push women.

Shouts of laughter followed us, even the lady at the desk joined in. It was rather odd I thought.

I was very grateful to Ermyntrude for taking me without a character, and I thanked her for it. I said I hoped to be worthy of the confidence she had reposed in me.

She said I wasn't to mention it, and changed the subject.

When we emerged into the chief street, I called a cab and handed her in, taking my place beside her. I asked her if she would return with me there and then, and if we could call for her luggage? I explained that Angus would be put out if I returned without a housekeeper. That I had practically promised not to do so.

She asked me who Angus was.

I explained.

She tossed her head. "Oh, one of them interfering Scots! I never take no stock of Scots, and it's best to be careful in dealin' with 'em."

I was disappointed. I could see she was already prejudiced against Angus, and I was specially anxious that the man who gardened and my housekeeper should take to one another.

Her home was on the way to the station, and we called for her box, which she had ready packed against such an emergency. It seemed to me a good augury to find a train waiting for us, and quite willing to take us at once to Hill Land.

I had of course my own first-class ticket, and I bought another for her, and handed her into the carriage. She looked round the carriage and then at me as I was about to take my place beside her, and suggested wouldn't I like to go smoking?

I said if she would excuse me I should certainly like a pipe, and she very kindly excused me. I feel sure Ermyntrude and I will get on extremely well together.

At the other end I ventured to ask her name.

She said Smith.

I tried not to sound disappointed, and called her Miss Smith.

She said she meant I was to call her plain Smith.

It was a singularly inappropriate name. I fidgetted, and finally asked her if she would mind my calling her Ermyntrude.

She said she would rather I didn't; it wouldn't sound quite a respectable sort of name to her, and her family had always been very respectable. She said a name like that was almost enough to make a girl "go wrong." She added that her own Christian name was Dorothea.

I asked her if I might take the liberty of calling her Dorothea, which I thought a very charming name and most suitable, and she said I might.

In the drive we met Angus, and he and Dorothea looked at each other in the most suspicious manner. When he lifted her box off the cab he did it in rather an insulting fashion. I was bitterly disappointed. I saw he did not approve of Dorothea. It placed me in a very awkward position, for I had no idea as to the right etiquette. Ought I, or ought I not, to perform a formal introduction?

"The great Gahoo," said Dorothea, when he was just *not* out of hearing, as I could see from his expression. "I don't think much of him—which is more than he can say of himself! He's just like all them blessed Scots, sir, full of conceit, and on the make somethink

shockin' ! I do hope as how you don't let 'im do you, sir ! "

" Oh, hush, Dorothea ! " I said distressed, " Angus has a most noble character, and in some ways he is almost a genius."

" Oh, a genius, sir ! " she tossed her head. " I was general for one onst, leastways that's what he called hisself. He did no work, just made books, and he mostly forgot—leastways he *said* it was forgettin'—to pay me my wages. I do hope you'll be careful with dealin' with that fellow, sir, seein' that he is a Scot as well as a genius."

Then I had to listen to the other side from Angus. It was very distressing. He decried my choice.

I pointed out what lovely blue eyes she had, what a figure, what a face ! "

" And what a cheek ! " he added.

" Oh, Angus, she has a most beautiful character ! "

" Maybe, sir, maybe, wimmin 'ave—in the *abstract.* But I do hope ye'll be very careful, and not let her get the better of you. She'll have opportunities a many of featherin' her own nest, and you do seem to ask for it, you do, sir, you bein' so simple and trustin' ; still I'll keep *my* eyes skinned."

" I had hoped you would like each other and be friends," I said miserably. " Your manner was so very stand-offish, Angus."

" I'm always stand-offish with wimmin', sir," replied Angus. " It's the only way to save yourself from 'em. They are that pernicious." I fancy he meant pertinacious. " If you take my advice, you'll do the same, sir."

I wondered what one did when one didn't want to

save oneself from them, but I didn't like to ask Angus. Instead I returned to the subject of Dorothea. "You looked at her with such suspicion!" I said reproachfully.

"Same as she looked at me, sir. I don't hold with wimmin, I never did. I've alluys intended to remain a bachelor, D.V.—or *not!* And you, sir, sure*lie* you feels the same. Here you are free and happy, able to come in and out as you likes. You can call your soul your own—and your money your own. No wife nor kids to be allus spending on——"

I sighed.

"Ladies bein' powerful good at spendin', sir, I have heard, specially them as come from short commons like. There's the vicar's lady. Five of them, all growed-up. You know what that means, sir."

"It must mean a lot of young life and beauty in the house," I answered enviously.

Angus expectorated into the flower-bed, and then he took up his spade. "Has she been round here yet, sir?"

She had accompanied the vicar on a call more than once, but my gate gives me a view of people coming long before they see me. Unfortunately I had happened to be "out."

Now Angus knew perfectly well what had happened. and it seemed a purposeless sort of question.

"She hasn't found me at home, unhappily," I said,

"She'll go on till she finds you *somewhere*, sir."

"Oh, no!" I gasped.

"The last gent to have this place, sir, well, his poor wife was hardly cold in her grave afore she was round a offerin' her sympathy. That's why he left so sud-

dint. 'Fly from temptation,' is my motter, don't stop to argue with it—it always gets the best of the argument—temptation."

He spat again into the flower-bed.

I changed the subject.

Then Angus began to talk of the squire. The great man prefers that he shall be called the squire rather than Mr. Pollyt. He is the sort of man who never forgets that though there may be other Pollyts in the world, there is only one squire of Hill Land. Under the circumstances Angus' allusion was lacking in respect. He called him " that there old blunderbuss."

" He's got a niece," he added inconsequently.

I could only hope, for her sake, she was better-favoured than her uncle.

Angus grudgingly said she wasna so bad—for a woman. " He's all for havin' her settled. She's one of those clever 'uns. One has to be extra careful like agin *'em,* sir."

I grew frightened at thought of the clever niece. She would see at once what a fool I was, and hold me up to ridicule.

I said I hoped I should never come across her. After all, it was not likely. It was not as if I was an acquisition to the place in any way.

" You'll come across her," said Angus, without any doubt whatsoever. He is a pessimist, always looking on the dark side of everything. " You'll come across Mrs. Gellet too, and Miss Grubb, and a damsite more afore you've finished. This here place is fair over-run with 'em, and there ain't nobody for 'em. Your comin' is like manna from heaven, sir."

I grew hot at once. So the neighbourhood was a

social one! However dull and even though a bachelor, I should be kindly permitted to know them all. In a way I longed to, but I knew I should never find the courage to make their acquaintance, and it was not likely they would trouble to make mine. Charity has its limits.

"She," went on Angus gloomily, alluding I discovered to Miss Pollyt, "has her own flat in Lunnon, and has her name and photers in papers, which gives her a sort of start-like. Dessay the squire will soon be havin' her down."

I hoped she would not be with the squire when he affected condescending genialities over my gate. The man really got on my nerves, and I had taken a dislike to him, which was almost painful and very inconvenient. I had never longed to be rude to anybody in my life till I met the pompous lord of the manor, and to him I longed most exceedingly to be very rude—only I hadn't the wit to manage it. I had just to suffer his insolence instead. He imagines he owns not only the houses of the people hereabouts—with the exception of Moss End—but their souls and bodies too. He has a fashionable wife who terrifies me. I envy most men their wives, and wonder how they have managed to secure them, but I cannot frankly say I envy the squire his, and I certainly do not envy the wife her husband. There are, however, two jolly little boys who have made friends with me.

Pollyt is indeed tyranny and narrowness personified. I am not afraid of him—he is very far from being clever—but the notion of meeting the clever niece certainly does appal me. Suppose she comes and says clever things at me over my gate! Suppose she is what is

called a brilliant woman! Suppose she is a writer or something horribly clever like that! Suppose she takes it into her head to dissect me for her books! I shouldn't have a chance against her. I should be added to her collection at once!

Frankly I am terrified at thought of the squire's niece.

CHAPTER VIII

I DISCOVER THAT THE PRICE OF DOROTHEA IS FAR ABOVE THAT OF RUBIES

TO say that Dorothea is a marvel is to put it mildly. She makes me ideally comfortable, understands by instinct all my likes and dislikes, and doesn't make me feel in the least afraid of her. She has obtained, I believe, an efficient staff, but I never see any of them. Dorothea attends to me herself, and she does it quite as if it were a pleasure instead of a duty. It is certainly a great pleasure to *me*. If only Pansy doesn't find out! The wages, I discovered, when I had at length got the right little book, are less than Pansy arranged for me to give. The comfort is more than double.

Dorothea fits into the pretty little housekeeper's room like the picture she is; the blue of the paper goes perfectly with her eyes and fair skin. I had indeed intended the room for a housekeeper with blue eyes and a fair skin. Her hair is almost the colour of corn.

I am not in the least afraid of her. It is quite wonderful! She loves the house and takes quite a personal pride in it, and her delight at her own dainty housekeeper's room is a great joy to me. None of the servants are allowed there. I can go in and have a

little chat with her when I please. Every week she brings me receipted books, which I never look at. She gets out my cheque-book and tells me the name to put down, the date and the figures. Housekeeping is a positive delight!

I said as much to Angus!

He snorted and said that he expected she was spending money like water.

I had to speak severely to Angus. I also told him Dorothea was most economical.

He asked me what the bills came to each week.

Of course I had no idea. I left all that to Dorothea.

"She'll be makin' money, trust wimmin for that!" he said.

I had never said anything when Angus dug up things I wanted left, and left things I wanted dug up, but I lost my temper now. I think he was astonished. I certainly must own I made rather an exhibition of myself.

Dorothea came out in the middle of it to fetch me to luncheon.

She often fetches me in—I don't mind being fetched in by Dorothea, who looks lovely with the sun on her hair—because she has an idea that it is my duty to eat things when they are hot. Sometimes it is rather inconvenient and I am not really hungry, though I usually feel so when I scent the appetising odours of the dishes she puts before me—but it is easier to be inconvenienced than to hurt Dorothea's feelings. She waited until I had got ahead and followed *me*. She always insists on this. I should much prefer to walk with her, but she will never allow it.

On this occasion, however, she very nearly caught

me up. "I'm glad you gave it him hot, sir," she said with considerable satisfaction, "he deserves it—the great Gahoo."

She looked at me queerly, and I realised she had overheard something; I wondered how much. I began blunderingly to explain, and to prevaricate a little.

I have come to the conclusion it is useless to prevaricate with women. In five minutes Dorothea dragged it all out of me. Her eyes got little blue sparks in them that made me very uncomfortable indeed. I said I was extremely sorry, that it should not happen again.

Then it appeared that it was Angus who had enraged her, not I, which was a relief to me. It was selfish and cowardly of me to feel like that, but I felt it just the same.

She asked me if I would do her a favour.

I replied that I couldn't think of a favour I *wouldn't* be proud to do her.

She requested me to take an armful of little books and accounts to him, and ask him to be good enough to go through them and make his "silly suggestions."

After a very excellent luncheon, I took the books to Angus, and gave him her message, or rather a polite version of it. I think I included her compliments or her kind regards. Anyway, Angus seemed put out, and said he "hadn't asked for none of her sauce."

Then he sat down, and proceeded to go slowly over each book; while I smoked happily in the shade, and thought what a lucky fellow I was, and how happy I ought to be, and how ungrateful it was to feel conscious of a blank all the time.

It took Angus a long time; some of the books he

went over three times. I picked up one idly, and studied the contents with admiration. At last, with rather a disappointed air, I thought, Angus put the whole collection aside.

"Doesn't Dorothea make lovely figures?" I asked him.

"Maybe she does, sir, and maybe she doesn't."

"And isn't she economical?"

I knew she must be, because Pansy had led me to believe that economy is the chief virtue of housekeepers, and Dorothea had *all* the virtues.

"Maybe she's but an extra deep one," he returned.

"Angus, fair play, please!" I was very indignant with him. "You are letting your prejudice against Dorothea blind you to the facts."

He went a dusky crimson.

"You know perfectly well she is economical?"

An unwilling smile of admiration crossed his face. "She's done the butcher out of a half-penny time an' again, and *he's* Scotch."

"I'm sure she hasn't," I said indignantly, "that would be being *too* economical, and hers is the perfect kind."

Angus made no reply. I left him looking a little crushed.

"Well, sir?" demanded Dorothea. "What had the great gaby to suggest, sir?"

"He had nothing to suggest," I said, and sighed. "Oh, Dorothea, aren't you a little hard on Angus? Is it fair to judge by appearances?"

"What's wrong with his appearance, sir?" she spoke quickly, almost sharply. I was astonished.

"Why, there's nothing wrong with it," I replied. I

had indeed often envied it. I said as much to Dorothea.

She tossed her head. "Handsome is as handsome does, is my motter, sir. I never seed a chap what put a more high value on hisself, and we all know men are pretty good at that!"

"Yes," I owned abashed. "I suppose we are. I suppose it's difficult not to put up our own value a little; there would scarcely seem anything left otherwise."

"If you'd 'ave told me I'd ever know a man, common or gent, what *under*-valued of hisself, sir, I wouldn't 'ave believed you, leastways, not a time ago, but I believe there's *one* of them, sir, though I don't believe there's any others. 'Tanyrate, that there great Gahoo ain't one of them! Well, he knows what I think of him, and that's somethink!"

"It must be lonely in that cottage with nobody to 'do' for him," I said. There was a gardener's cottage by the drive gates. Of course Angus had quite understood that it had nothing to do with the garden, and did not make him in *any* sense a gardener. It just happened to be vacant, so I asked him to oblige me by occupying it. I hired him daily just the same.

"Some prefers to be lonely, sir!" sniffed Dorothea. "They 'as the cheek to think that it takes some work to *keep* lonely, but them as is wisest in their own conceit often comes a good old mucker in the end. I shouldn't be surprised if Angus does."

It seemed odd that a man should prefer to be lonely. I wondered what it was like to come "a mucker;" it had a very unpleasing sound. I could not imagine Angus doing anything he shouldn't, and said as much.

I think you'd be surprised if you knew how very well and thoroughly Dorothea looks after me. It's an absurd sort of thing to say—she is twenty-five, I am nearly forty—but in the nicest sense of the word she is a mother to me. I go to her for everything, entirely as a matter of course. She does things without my telling her to, in the most extraordinary fashion.

For instance, it is not very nice to have all the buttons off your underclothing, and not at all nice to mention their lack to a young woman, but Dorothea put them all on without my having to mention it at all.

She even found certain garments I had hidden securely away—as I supposed—because of it seeming nicer to pretend there *weren't* such things, and put buttons on *them*. She never says anything about it. I just find them in the drawers. When I want a thing it is always to hand.

She allows me to smoke wherever I like, keep the spade in the hall, and I needn't change my boots if I don't want to. She just sweeps up after me and laughs, and says she likes sweeping.

She has, however, said she would rather I did not go into the drawing-room with muddy boots on, so I don't—when I remember ! I like to open the door now and then just to look at it.

Dorothea says a carpet like that has got to be respected, that it looks to your honour and nice feeling to take care of it. It has a cream ground with pink roses cast delightfully upon it here and there—so delightfully that one could almost pick them. The border is of trailing roses, and one sinks into it ever so far.

Dorothea said it "made her blink to think of what it must have cost."

Having the fear of Pansy before my eyes, and not knowing when she might decide to make a hurried descent upon us, I thought it better to give Dorothea a hint.

I was anxious that Pansy should not put her out in any way.

"Er—you know, Dorothea, I have a sister-in-law?" I began nervously.

"Most folk 'ave. I have two, the less said about them the better, sir."

I agreed with her, I am afraid, but I thought it better she should be on her guard.

"Mine is my brother James' wife," I said, "and she—er—she brought me up, you know."

"It done her credit, sir!" She spoke heartily.

"Y-e-s," I agreed, "of course it was awfully kind of her. I was an orphan of ten, she was a young wife of twenty, and very good at managing. So she managed me. She likes to think she's managed me ever since," I confessed.

"Oh, I see!"

"She expected me to be satisfied with the staff she got for me, and all that sort of thing you know. And—and if she says anything to you, Dorothea, that you don't *quite* like, you won't go away and leave me, will you? I should die if you went away and left me, and Mrs. Delland got me another Mrs. Perkins, as she'd be sure to do."

"I shan't leave you for nobody," she declared, looking very determined. "I quite understand. You leave her to me."

CHAPTER IX

"'MELIA-HANN"

ONE day I observed that I had an interested spectator. I don't think I dug any the better for it, though she was such a little one! After a quarter of an hour's rigid scrutiny she said, "Hullo!"

As I could not think of any remark to offer—I never can!—I said "Hullo!" too. She seemed perfectly satisfied. She was an eager-faced child with the zest of life very vivid in it, and with a sharp chin, which she rested on the third rung of my gate.

She has taken to stopping every day now on her way to and from school. She watches my gardening operations in friendly silence and interest for a certain space of time, and then she smiles in a vivid sort of way and says, "Hullo!"

And of course I say "Hullo!" too.

For one week we have continued our "hullo-ing," and I should miss the quaint little figure more than I can say, but we get no further in our acquaintanceship. Possibly the lack of progress is entirely my fault. I am no hand at talking to women; such wits as I possess promptly drop out of my head at sight of a petticoat. This is the more odd, as I should love all women a little, and one a great deal—if I dared.

But I don't dare.

That any woman should ever come to take a special interest in me is not only impossible, but ridiculous. I will not say I have not hoped it—hope dies hard—but I can honestly say I have never expected it. And now, of course, it is too late. I really am an incurable old fogy, and far from handsome. Even in my youth I was plain ; still in those days I was slim, and that is always something, I think. I now go out where once I went in—and without an effort. To the slim all things are possible. And—why deny it ?—I could be taller with advantage.

I really think the tall and slim are actually less sentimental than their shorter, stouter brethren, but it is usually to the tall and slim, and seldom to the short and fat, that Romance prefers to wing her golden flight.

If I had ever committed the audacity of falling in love, never, never could I have found the audacity to propose !

Even the elderly and the unattractive disconcert me, while of the pretty, the clever, or the flirtatious, my fear is almost morbid. I know they must be laughing at me all the time, and the thought is an agony.

Therefore this friendliness on the part of a woman in miniature, which might have meant little or nothing to the fortunate of my sex, meant rather a lot to me. I did not want her to lose her interest in me, but I had no idea what to say or do to keep it.

I didn't want her to find out sooner than was necessary what a fool I was either. The sharp-chinned visitor would depart in scorn and laughter, and as

usual I should have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. It is not a pleasant process—for those somewhat light in weight.

When we had " Hullo-ed " for a week and seemed no nearer extending our vocabulary, I took a bold step.

I asked the small daughter of Eve her name. Eve would have suited her well enough, I fancy—one could see she was full of insatiable, perhaps dangerous, curiosity—but I wanted it to be Priscilla. I don't know why. I only knew that it *had* to be Priscilla, or at least Patience.

It was 'Melia-Hann.

I suppose I should have known. For some their Priscillas are always 'Melia-Hanns.

" Dear me ! " I said feebly.

I am a singularly inarticulate person. It's odd in a way ; my brother James is a great and very excellent talker. I have the few drops of Irish blood in my veins which is supposed to tend to a fluent tongue, but I can only suppose they are just a few drops *too* few, that James got more than his share and I less than mine. I certainly haven't enough to leaven the lump.

I was less dumb at twenty than I was at thirty ; at forty (or more correctly thirty-nine) I am very dumb indeed. To have lived in the world for forty years and never to have said one apt, effective or witty thing ! Think of that, ye who take such gifts easily ! Mine is almost a unique record, I imagine. Yet, in my humble way, I have thought quite a lot, and on most subjects, but since I keep them to myself, I have no means of knowing whether they are intelligent thoughts or otherwise—quite possibly otherwise. I must have some sort of a sense of humour, because I can see what

a very absurd creature I am, and that requires humour, surely.

"Do you dig for hever an' hever-amen, mister? asked 'Melia-Hann.

"Oh, no," I said, "sometimes I plant, you know."

"Do you dig fings up to see 'em grow?"

"Heaven forbid!" I exclaimed in horror.

"Then what *fun* is it, mister?"

I must acknowledge she'd got me there. For what fun was it after all? I might dig and plant and prune, but there was nobody to do it for but myself. I might aim at having a bower of roses rare and fair beyond compare, but there was nobody to give them to, nobody to sit in that bower and say how hard I had worked—and there never would be anybody.

"I don't do things for fun," I said at length—perhaps a trifle severely. For I would so much have liked to.

"*I* do. Why don't you? 'Ave yer got religion?"

She eyed me with distrust. Seemed, indeed, on the verge of taking her departure.

"Certainly not!" I said hastily.

"Well, don't you go and get it, mister. Drink don't matter the same. You're sober sometimes, but with religion you're got it *all* the time. Don't you 'ave no fun, then?"

I declined to tell the brutal truth. It was bad enough without that; one can go on pretending to oneself that all's well with the world, as long as one doesn't own in bald language how very far from well it is. Mine had always been rather out of joint. I had a goal—and no method of reaching it.

"Well—er—it's different," I said. But how different I had no idea.

"Fun's fun, mister," said 'Melia-Hann sententiously.

I agreed. It committed me to nothing.

"An' diggin's just diggin'. Eh?"

I said it was. Besides it was perfectly true; it was merely just digging. It almost seemed as if this small daughter of Eve was somewhat of a philosopher.

"An' there's school . . ." my visitor sighed. She knew the name of her evil and did not fear to name it. I have to pretend not to know the name of mine.

When in doubt try morality! I asked her if she oughtn't to be in school at the present moment.

"Ay," she owned laconically

"Then? . . ."

"Teachers ain't *alluys* lookin'."

I don't know to what special religious sect, if any, 'Melia-Hann belonged, but I could *feel* her in that moment "thanking whatever gods there be."

"Why isn't she always looking?" I asked foolishly. I can only ask the most obvious of questions. But I do not always get equally obvious answers. I didn't now.

"'Cos she's got a fellow. *You* know, mister."

"Er—what's a fellow?" I asked lamely. I did not quite know. I only had my suspicions.

"A chap."

"And a chap?"

"A fellow what kisses when he finks folk don't see," announced 'Melia-Hann with a scornful laugh.

"Oh!" I said blankly, and I knew I was blushing.

"Only folk *do!*" added 'Melia-Hann maliciously.

I blushed again. It hardly seemed nice of "folk,"

I thought, and must be especially dreadful for the "fellow."

"When I'm growed up I shall have a chap."

'Melia-Hann made the statement in a quite matter-of-fact, though, at the same time, a very positive manner. She had no doubt that Romance would wing *to* her, not from her. Lucky 'Melia-Hann!

"Will you?" I said.

"'Cours you just 'ave to, to stop folk laffin'. All gals do, soon as they're growed." She was very emphatic.

"How nice," I said, replying absently to 'Melia-Hann, "and have all the—the gentlemen ladies?"

"Oh, yes, mister, there's our Jarge now, 'e's 'ad five, Jarge 'as."

I took rather a dislike to the greedy George.

"I suppose he's young and handsome and slim—and good at talking?" I asked enviously.

"Oh, naw, mister! Not our Jarge! It's just a way 'e 'as wiff 'im, some 'as it, some *'asn't*."

"I see," I said despondently. "Still he can talk, of course?" I was rather insistent on this point.

"Our Jarge! Naw, 'e just says nowt. It's *them* as does it."

"Then why in Heaven's name can't they do it to *me?*" I exclaimed in sudden exasperation.

She had her answer—almost too apt a one.

"Say! Yer old, ain't yer, mister?"

"No," I lied, and added more correctly, "at least nothing to speak of."

"An' yer a 'centric an' a'—a'scuse, isn't yer? I comed to see what them was like. But you don't look different to other gents, 'cept . . . ." She pulled herself up suddenly.

"Except what?" I asked persuasively.

She giggled. "I dassent, mister!"

"*Please*, 'Melia-Hann!"

"You'll frow fings at me!" She prepared to dodge.

"I swear I won't. How do you mean I'm different'?"

She touched her forehead, "Here," she said frankly.

I stared at her in horror. It was a knock-down blow.

"I knew you'd be waxy!" she started to depart.

"But I'm not. I just don't understand." As a matter of fact I feared I understood only too well. She had not only found out very quickly indeed that I was a fool, but she had imagined me something even more than just a fool.

"Soft in the yead," she said, "like Billy, you know, leastways different to Billy, you bein' a gent an' rich . . . . an' not 'avin' fits as folk *knows* of. But perhaps gents 'ave their fits private-like? *I* should if I was a gent."

"I don't have fits at all!" I burst out almost violently, though with not much hope that she would believe me. She had made up her mind about me, and it was not to be easily shaken. I had passed Billy, the village idiot, with a shudder. I suppose I should have seen that it was rather funny, but somehow I didn't. Perhaps because I was too near to a fool to relish being taken entirely for one.

"Do you think I *look* soft in the head?" I gasped at length.

Had I prided myself, that if plain, I was at least intelligent-looking, for this? Had I merely been blind to the awful truth? Was that why my fellow-men had rather pointedly avoided me? And yet, to be a

little romantic is surely not to be insane, though perhaps for me it was—in very truth—the acme of insanity.

Amelia looked me up and down, and I waited for the verdict of that village child with an agony that seemed to sear my soul.

When she spoke I found my face damp. "Naw," she said, "you don't look it, but——"

"But what?" I gasped.

"But—you never know." She took little on trust it seemed.

"But is there anything *odd* in it?" I know my voice sounded desperate.

"Your eyes is funny."

That really went home, for my eyes were, or so it had seemed in my vain conceit, my one passable feature, dark grey, well-set, well-shaped. "*Funny?*"

"As if you looked through folk an' way yonder. What *is* you lookin' for, mister?"

"Nothing—or a miracle perhaps," I sighed. After all Romance could never be sighted on that dim horizon by me. What was the use of straining my eyes looking for it? Pansy, in a moment of rare expansion, had praised me by saying that if I was a fool I was "a nice fool," but it seemed to me that I was merely *all* fool.

'Melia-Hann roused me. Her voice is sharp, like all the rest of her, "An' you *don't* 'ave fits?"

Almost passionately I swore on my word of honour that I did not have fits of any description whatsoever.

I think she believed me, reluctantly perhaps, but still she believed me.

She sighed, her face falling. "I likes to see folk foamin'," she announced in a matter-of-fact tone.

I shuddered. Was that why her "Hullos" had dispersed my solitude for a week? Was that why she had been content to watch me with such interest?

She answered my thoughts. "I likes to be there when fings 'appen," she said, "an' I mostly is, so's mother. It runs in 'er family, it does."

She spoke very proudly, as one might mention a great talent, or a beautiful feature, running in the family.

I supposed that now I should lose her acquaintanceship, because I could not be depended upon to "foam." Once or twice before I had come in sight of a friend only to lose him.

"Billy, 'e——"

I could not endure to have the superior claims of Billy thrust upon my notice. I plunged wildly to continue some part of the conversation. "So you're going to have a young man when you grow up, are you?" I asked. "I'm sure he'll be a very fortunate young man!"

"Now, mister, you come orf it," she said, with some indignation, "Don't you go amakin' game o' me!"

"I assure you I wasn't. I was only hoping that your young man would make you a nice husband."

"You mean married, like father an' mother. Not me, mister! I'll 'ave the cortin', but I won't 'ave no marryin', no, not *hever!*" She set her mouth with remarkable determination.

"Why not?" I asked astonished.

"'Cos then you 'ave babies most o' the time," she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

I blushed hotly, and scarcely liked to look at 'Melia-Hann. I felt, however, that protest I must. "Not

most of the time surely," I gasped, " and babies are very nice. Only just now and *then*, 'Melia-Hann ! "

It does not do to contradict 'Melia-Hann. She is a very literal lady.

" Huh ! We've 'ad seven a'ready, though some 'as died, an' mother she's agoin' ter——"

I dived after a broken flower-pot with a burning face. Oh, the awful, pitiful precocity of the poor !

" It gives me a lot of work, mister," went on 'Melia-Hann, warming, I could see to my horror, to the theme. " What arrangin' I 'ave to do, you wouldn't believe ! This new 'un is sure to be a fair terror when it comes, they alluys is, and father at the pub, not workin' no more, an' aknockin' mother about somethink shameful. I 'ave 'im on me 'ands too, the talkin' I give 'im, but it ain't no good when he's drunk, an' 'e's been mostly drunk lately ! Talk of 'usbints, not for me, no you don't, mister ! I *knows* 'em, the bloomin' swine ! "

She spoke of husbands as a race or species of its own, and one far below the level of hers. Her small, white face was full of bitter scorn.

" Surely there are exceptions ? " I pleaded.

The judge was inexorable. " There's just 'usbints," she said.

" There's wives," I said feebly. It was all I could think of at the moment. It was not a brilliant reply, but then, I am never brilliant.

" 'Ave *yer* one anywheres ? " She looked under the hedge.

I cannot imagine myself keeping a wife under a hedge—or imagine a wife who would submit so to be kept.

" No," I said sadly.

"Yer don't *want* one, does yer?" Her amaze was great.

"Wanting isn't much good," I said; "a pleasant tongue or face, or a stalwart, strapping figure is a good deal more to the point, 'Melia-Hann."

She stared, "You 'ave the 'oof," she said.

The implication was dreadful. "Oh, don't," I implored her. "It is not nice to suppose there are women like that!"

"There's *sense*," said 'Melia-Hann rather sharply. "A gal wants a chap who does her proud with clothes an' presents an' fings."

"There are things a millionaire cannot buy," I said gravely, "things no one wishes to buy, 'Melia-Hann."

"There was a millynair stayin' long of squire onst, a' orful sick-lookin' old gent, 'e were. They said as 'ow 'e were goin' to buy a new stummick, but I don't fink 'e did—'e looked just the same shape after the operation. Carn't you buy new stummicks, mister?"

"I don't know," I said a little shortly. I was rather disconcerted.

"Is it yer hair?"

It had seemed to me that since I had started gardening so vigorously, and been so much without my hat, that the thin part on top was much less thin, and that there was an ease when I buttoned the belt of an old coat that I had long missed. But apparently it must have been my imagination. 'Melia-Hann at least saw me rather as I was, than as I wished to be.

"Not only my hair, I'm afraid it is all of me," I groaned.

"Is that why you garden all the time, and don't have no fun?"

Perhaps it was, though I had not guessed it. "I don't know," I confessed.

"Naw, I spose not. Say, mister, you bain't like one of them as gives nothing to nobody, not to go by your heyes, you ain't!"

I was bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"Them flowers. They is proper fine, they is." Her peaked face was suddenly wistful.

Eagerly I gathered a vast bunch and thrust them into the hot, thin little hands. "Will you really have them?" I asked breathlessly.

"Go hon, don't you be amakin' your game o' me! You don't say the whole bloomin' lot is for me! I meant just a one to 'ave a sniff at. I ain't give you nowt, it's you what 'as agived me a fair treat, mister, but I don't like to be laffed at!"

She buried her sharp little nose in the flowers. Everything was sharp about 'Melia-Hann, her tongue, her nose and chin, her whole face indeed; even the elbows coming through her dress.

"I assure you that your acceptance of them, and talk to me, is a very great pleasure, 'Melia-Hann," I said.

"You go hon, you an' your jokes! You're a reglar cure, you are, an' no herror!"

With which she vanished swiftly. I sincerely trust she will come again. I think I should be very happy if I could believe I had really made a friend at last. Of course Dorothea and Angus are my friends, but they belong to the household, which is different.

What I hanker after is an entirely independent friend.

CHAPTER X

'MELIA-HANN'S "GALLUS-BIRD"

TO-DAY, when 'Melia-Hann stopped at my gate on her way from school, she was not alone. With her was a boy some years her senior, his face repulsive and depraved—one of those faces one sees in reformatories—unreformable.

She introduced him proudly.

"Tommie Burt, mother's cousin's sister-in-law's son 'e be, an' a rare bad 'un!" 'Melia-Hann had a liking for notoriety, and sensed it in the company of this embryo criminal.

She pointed out my garden to the evil-faced boy. "Ain't it fine?" she said, adding possessively, "And this is the gent I telled you about, a puffict cure!"

His callous face remained unillumined. "I don't take no stock o' gardens," he answered contemptuously, "I like cuttin' up live animals best."

I would have given a great deal to have had the cutting of him up—with a cat-o'-nine tails!

"If I 'ad a garden like this 'ere all of me hown, I'd go fair off me dot with joy, I would so! What'd yer do, Tommie Burt?"

"I'd take a knife an' I'd cut all the silly 'eads off them flowers, that's what *I'd* do," replied Tommie Burt.

"Go away, you little devil!" I said with a sudden access of temper.

"Shan't," he repeated with much that is unprintable. I was horrified that he should use such vile language before a member of the other sex. But 'Melia-Hann was not horrified, she took it entirely as a matter of course. She also kept an open mind in the controversy between us, she took the side of neither—she merely waited to fall as spoil to the victor.

It was up to me to see that I retained the friendship of 'Melia-Hann.

I opened the gate suddenly, and took a running kick at the evil boy. If I didn't exactly kick him into the middle of next week, I kicked him into the middle of the next hedge, which did almost as well. He disappeared with shrill cries and further objurgations.

"Serve 'im right," said the lady who chose to be considered his relative, "'E's a rare bad 'un, 'e is. Lor-lumme, 'ere's the parson!"

He was making for us too! Of course he had seen my brutal action, and put the worst construction on it; possibly he had also heard me use words I shouldn't. He was coming to preach Christian charity.

'Melia-Hann darted through my gate and secreted herself in my hedge. When the vicar hesitated at the gate there was nobody to be seen. I had joined 'Melia-Hann.

After a painful pause, during which I fought with, and mastered, a would-be sneeze, he passed on again.

We returned from seclusion and grinned sheepishly at each other.

'Melia-Hann giggled wildly. "Say, mister, you're a

rum 'un, ain't yer! Do you fink he seed? Yer leg was pokin' out, yer know?"

She giggled again.

I mopped my face, reply was beyond me. Heaven grant he hadn't seen! I was always putting myself in the wrong, making my actions quite inexcusable.

"Ain't Tommie Burt a cure?"

"A *cure?*" She had applied the same term to me.

"They say he'll hend on the gallows, sure as heggs!" she announced exultantly, "an' him a relation, though distant!" Her eyes sparkled.

"Say, mister, 'ave yer hever been to a hangin'?" she added.

"No!" I shuddered.

I went down in her estimation at once. But then I always *do* go down in people's estimation sooner or later—usually sooner.

"But you've got the 'oof!" she said.

"I don't think I care for entertainments of that description," I said apologetically.

"*I* shall go to Tommie's 'angin', if I can squeedge in anywhere. I like to be there when fings 'appen—an' an 'angin' would be more hexcitin' heven than a funeral or a death in the 'ouse! But if it was yer own relation yer'd go then, mister, yer'd *want* ter, eh?"

I suppose quite a lot of people would go to see some of their relations hanged—and go quite cheerfully. I wouldn't have Pansy hung, not for worlds, but the human heart is very wicked, and if something sudden, and quite painless, were to happen, and James wasn't too upset, I should not be as grieved as it would be my duty to be. I do not mean I would not be sorry—I am not altogether vile—but I sadly fear I should

not be sorry enough. I'm afraid I should bear the great trial with that fortitude with which one bears the trials of others.

"'E runned away from the deformatory, 'e did! Fancy that now, mister! 'E's just born to be 'anged, an' that's a fact!"

I shuddered. It seemed to me so terrible to create a human being for no other end than this. I fell to meditating upon crime and its punishment.

'Melia-Hann twitched me by the sleeve with some indignation. "Say, mister, you 'ave a reg'lar balmy look, so help me! Do yer stop it now, it fair gives me the shivers."

"I beg your pardon, I had no right to let my thoughts wander in your presence."

"None o' your makin' game o' me! The parson 'e's a terror, but *'er*, Gor-bless-me! she's a *damsite* worse, she is! 'As us all hends up, she 'as!"

"O, surely not!" I gasped.

"You wait an' see. Folk don't hoften get the better of 'er, and you ain't one of the clever 'uns, is yer?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then she'll 'ave yer all right. So long, mister! I'm glad you gived Tommie Burt somethink for hisself, folk is mostly a bit scared of 'im!"

CHAPTER XI

MRS. KEARNESS FINDS ME "IN"

I THINK I have mentioned that I have a great horror of cats, I don't know whether I mentioned another—vicars' wives. It is absurd, I know, contemptible—what you will—and of course quite inexcusable, but it remains with me just the same—a cold, paralysing fear that is not to be exorcised.

One day when I had for a few moments rashly turned my back to the road, Mrs. Kearness came up behind me, looked over my gate, and said tentatively, "Mr. Delland, I believe?"

Of course I was Mr. Delland. Equally, of course, she knew it. I looked wildly round. Oh for the earth to cover me! There was only the hedge—and it was too late for that.

I faced her, perspiring freely.

I think she thought my condition due to work, for she smiled, and said pleasantly, "You do work hard! And what a nice garden, isn't it?" But she never looked at the garden!

I discovered that she was a beautiful woman rather than otherwise—if a trifle stout. It disconcerted me afresh.

"I am Mrs. Kearness," she went on in that deter-

mined-to-be-pleasant voice I know so well. It sometimes seems as if it's kept especially for me; for with others it seems to be pleasant without an effort. How odd it must be to have people pleasant to you because it is a pleasure, and not a hard social duty!

"Oh . . . are you?" I said foolishly.

"The vicar's wife, you know."

She, of course, knew I knew. That sort of thing is one of the most trying banalities of conversation. "Oh, are you?" I said again.

I wondered how long she intended to stay and talk to me against my will.

She looked at me pityingly. I was so obviously a fool. I wish for a change I might occasionally get taken for a knave. It would be rather refreshing, and much less humiliating.

"I am so sorry you were out each time we called."

I daren't look at her. I dug aimless holes in the ground. "I—I'm often out," I stammered desperately. "I—er—really you know, I *ought* to be out now——," I thought longingly of my bedroom. Even vicars' wives don't intrude into bachelors' bedrooms unless they are ill. I decided that I would never be ill.

I think she must have realised my intention, for she was so quick to frustrate it. "I was wondering if I might venture to ask for a few flowers for the church?" she said.

I gathered an armful and thrust them at her. Now, perhaps, she would go. But no, it had just been a trap.

"I shall put them on the altar myself. I am sure you will admire them there."

I said nothing. I was only too ready to give the flowers, anything, indeed, that I might be permitted

to give, but attendance at church—that was a very different matter. It was not the worship that appalled me, but the worshippers. To have the eyes of all on my miserable shrinking self because a stranger never entered there; to have 'Melia-Hann pointing me out to the school children; to see disappointment after disappointment on every fair face present as they saw I was no gallant knight, not young, or handsome or interesting. Just "that short, fat, ugly man." I do not think I am quite as bad as that, but women have a habit of exaggeration that means nothing.

"You must not despise our poor little church because you have known the great cathedrals. I assure you we have very nice services, with everybody joining in, Mr. Delland."

"Oh, *have* you?" said I.

"And the vicar and myself will be at all times most pleased to welcome you to them, or to the vicarage."

"Thank you," I said miserably.

I think she thought it better to descend to my soulless level.

She pointed to my dog. "A nice little fellow. We have one at home called Bobs! Will you allow me to make the acquaintance of yours? Please call him for me?"

I wriggled uncomfortably. How could I? He was called Satan for one thing, but more often, if one really meant him to come, "Come-here-Satan-dammit!" How could I use such language before a lady—let alone the vicar's wife?

I wiped my heated face and tried to edge away.

"Please call him! I love dogs."

"Do you?"

"What's his name?"

I went most frightfully red. "I don't know," I stammered.

"Don't know! But how is he to come when you call him if he hasn't a name?"

"He mostly doesn't come," I said apologetically.

"But that is very disobedient!" she said shocked.

I couldn't deny it.

"If you whistle?"

I whistled—if the sound could be dignified by such a name!

"He is taking no notice at all!" she said indignantly.

I was not surprised. Satan invariably ignores whistles—even when they are whistles.

"Isn't he?" was all I said.

"Perhaps you didn't whistle loud enough?" she went on, smiling very pleasantly.

I made the same sound, only louder. Satan looked up and openly showed his contempt.

"I'm sure he heard."

"Did he?"

"Dogs ought to come when they are called! Ours always do."

"Perhaps he's busy," I said, in abject excuse of Satan.

"Yes; making holes in your flower-beds!" she spoke rather drily.

"He keeps his bones there."

"But that ruins the flowers! You shouldn't allow it."

"I can't help it," I said. Would the inquisition never end?

"Dogs ought to be trained."

"Ought they?"

"Yes, of course," she spoke a little impatiently. "It makes things so different."

"For the dog or for me?" I asked heavily.

"For both; and it would be for his good."

I said nothing, but I decided to struggle no more with Satan if it was for his good. All the disagreeables inflicted upon me by Mrs. Clive had been for my good.

"You could make him understand," she went on. "For instance, he might be made to realise that no bones would be given him if he continued to bury them in the flower-beds."

"He'd just take the bones himself in that case," I returned. "He's that *sort* of a dog."

Her lips tightened. I think she would have liked to give me up as hopeless, but she determined to do her duty.

"He would understand if it was to his own advantage to do so," she persisted. "There are few impossibilities if only one has patience, Mr. Delland."

"Are there? But I've a crimson rambler that *won't* ramble."

It had been the despair of our predecessors; it was the despair of Angus and myself. It would be infinitely better for all concerned if it would justify its name, but it simply wouldn't, and nothing could make it.

Mrs. Kearness glanced at me with suspicion, and suddenly I remembered with horror certain absurdities that my pupils had thrust upon me, such as why does the "fly fly"? why does the "cro-cus"? and so on. One of them had had rather an indelicate reply. I went as crimson as the rambler should have been. What did

she suspect me of? I looked—I knew—the picture of guilt.

I think she decided there was but one thing to do—to change the subject. She changed it.

"Amelia Hopkins tells me you have been very kind to her?" she said graciously.

"Oh no, it is she who has been kind to me!" I stuttered.

"But you gave her flowers. Unfortunately children scarcely ever appreciate such things, and are very destructive."

"Are they?"

"We were sorry you were not quite so kind to Tommie Burt. One wants to help up and encourage the fallen, I think; not push them down, Mr. Delland."

"But I didn't push him," I said stupidly. "I kicked him. He . . . is not a nice child."

She drew herself up a little stiffly, "Pardon me, but naturally I know more of the people among whom my work has lain for twenty years than you—a newcomer—can possibly do. The child is struggling upwards to the light. He has seen the error of his ways. Lately he has attended Sunday School regularly."

"'Melia-Hann was telling me about the treat," I said incautiously. That attendance went up in the most marvellous fashion when treats came into view I had heard from 'Melia-Hann, who made no bones about it, but stated the fact frankly. "You've *got* to 'ave a hobject," she had added.

Mrs. Kearness' flush of annoyance showed me how unfortunate had been my remark; she carried the war into the enemy's country.

"We are gradually training him not to use bad

language," she said rather acidly, " and have succeeded really marvellously."

I wondered what she would have thought of the depraved language of a few days back.

She paused; I thought she had finished, for she seemed about to go, and made ready to snatch at my discarded hat. I would have to put it on to take it off, but daily we perform more ridiculous actions.

" And of course . . . example is so much, isn't it, Mr. Delland ? "

So the vicar had told on me! He was a parson first and a gentleman afterwards—rather a long way afterwards!

" I seldom or never use bad language," I said stiffly.

" I quite understand, an unfortunate habit. . . . One gets not to notice it, but still . . . you see what I *mean ?* "

I bowed. I wondered inconsequently if *she* also wrote her husband's sermons. I could imagine her thoroughly efficient.

" You see we are reforming the child."

" Are you ? "

" We *are,* Mr. Delland ! " Her voice was sharp.

I had not meant to express any doubt. She was vowed to a losing cause, and I admired her courage.

" Of course ! " I said.

" I sometimes think if certain people realised their responsibilities . . . how different things would be, and how much easier for others ? "

" Would they ? "

" Of course, next to the squire, whom we all know so well, you are the most important person here. Moss End has always taken a certain standing. The eyes

of the whole village are upon you, Mr. Delland. It is a grave thought!"

"It is indeed!" I gasped trembling.

"And it is such a censorious world!"

"Is it?" I faltered. I had not found it so.

"It is hateful that one must own that it *is*, but it shows us how very careful we ought to be, how above-board in all our actions; we must avoid even the appearance of evil . . ." she paused, swallowed, and her face went scarlet.

I stared at her dazed. I wondered what I had done.

"Your young housekeeper now," she said in an embarrassed tone, "of course *we* know, but that doesn't prevent people talking, does it? And my husband . . . such a difficult position, such heavy responsibilities, and people ask him of course . . . you see, don't you?" She looked on the ground.

"I don't wonder people talk of her," I said warmly. "Isn't she just a perfect dear?"

"Er—well, really I must be going!"

I put on and took off my hat only too eagerly.

Her back had a very stiff expression.

"I assure you I am not in the habit of using bad language," I earnestly assured her.

She made no reply.

Then I forgot all about her, for I saw what the dog was doing, literally pulling a pet flower out by the roots to get at his bone.

"Satan!" I yelled lustily. "Satan, you little devil, you!"

He took no notice.

"Come here, Satan, dammit," I shrieked.

Then he turned and came.

Mrs. Kearness turned too, and I realised that she must have heard everything! What would she think? Yet there was comfort in the thought of my disgrace. She would hold conversations over the gate with me no more.

CHAPTER XII

MRS. KEARNESS INSISTS ON FORGIVING ME

MRS. KEARNESS is a very good Christian woman. In spite of all I had done, and left undone, she spoke to me again to-day. I feel I cannot but respect Mrs. Kearness very dreadfully indeed. I do wish respect was not such a painful thing—that it did not make you long to fly the respected.

She came upon me again when I wasn't looking, and demanded curiously to know what I was sowing.

I read off the list I held in my hand readily enough, I loved the sound of the words I had chosen, "Amaranthus," I began, "Calliopsis, Helianthus, Eschscholtzia, Delphinium, Veronica Syriaca, Arbutus Japonica, Lad's Love, Forget-Me-Not, Love-Lies-Bleeding, Clematis, Jasmine, Passion Flower, Hollyhocks, Lil——"

I paused suddenly, though there were dozens of even more delightful names to come, but there was something in her face which arrested me. It wore the most extraordinary expression! Her mouth was a little open; her eyes very wide open indeed.

"You can't sow all those together, and at the same time," she gasped, "and lots of them you cannot sow at all!"

"Why not?" I asked defiantly, and deliberately

scattered another handful of seed. It was my garden, and I was going to have what I liked there in spite of all the vicars' wives in the world! I know what Pansy calls "my obstinate look" was in my face.

"Because each has its own season, and special treatment, and you've mixed up shrubs and flowers; of course I suppose they are your favourites?"

She looked at me in a puzzled sort of way.

"I don't know," I replied.

"Don't know! Then what principle did you go on?"

"I don't go on principles," I said, offended. "I liked the sounds, so ticked them off on the catalogue."

"You mean the pictures surely——"

"My catalogue hadn't pictures," I returned sulkily. "I mean the sounds."

"How can flowers have sounds?"

"I read them to you, beautiful sounds, but there are others——" I straightened out my list.

"Oh please don't!" she gasped. "It—it seems such an extraordinary idea! *Sounds!*"

"I wanted to see what flower came up to each sound," I explained patiently. I wish people would not ask so many questions, and need so very much explanation of what is perfectly simple. It makes life more difficult, I think—to say nothing of gardening.

I just went on sowing to show her. I hoped she would go away. I don't pretend to know much about flowers as flowers, but in every other respect I feel I know them quite well; one can love without knowledge, it seems to me. Sometimes too much knowledge means too little love. One demands to "see the wheels go round," and what has once been a marvel becomes no more than a skilful mechanism.

"Then you have no favourite flower, as far as sight goes?" She spoke in that patient voice one uses in addressing a naughty child or a fool.

"Yes, I think primroses, I am almost certain it is primroses," I said. My woods were full of them, and I think the sense of spring in them had a little gone to my head at times.

"Why primroses?"

There was Mrs. Kearness wanting to see the wheels go round!

But I only said dully that I liked them *because* I liked them.

"That big patch that you have been digging by the gate, what is to go there?"

"Bachelors' Buttons," I answered. I spoke firmly, for somehow I felt she would try to dissuade me from that too.

And, indeed, she looked far from pleased. "What an odd idea!" she said a trifle sharply.

"Why odd?" I asked. "It seemed to me most suitable in *every* way."

"Well, perhaps some of these days you will change your mind," she laughed a little, "and at any rate, you know, you cannot grow them this year unless you order plants; it is far too late for sowing." She seemed quite pleased I could not grow them this year.

"Well, they will make a nice show for next," I returned philosophically.

"If you are still of the same mind!" She spoke in quite an arch tone.

"Oh, I shall always be of the same mind," I returned doggedly.

She sighed as if I was too stupid for words, but she still remained to do her parochial duty to me.

"When do you next expect your delightful sister-in-law?" she enquired.

I wonder why people, specially those who do not know her, always speak of my "delightful" or "charming" sister-in-law!

"I never expect Pansy," I said a little gloomily, for Mrs. Kearness had brought an ever-present fear nearer. "She comes without being expected, usually when she's least expected."

"Takes you by surprise? I see! How nice!"

"Very," I returned drily.

"I should so much like to call on her," she said brightly.

I grew confused. I remembered all Pansy had said of clergymen's wives, and of how she had warned me against Mrs. Kearness in particular. Suppose Mrs. Kearness did call! And Pansy was rather rude! What then? I should be there between the two women I so much respected, trying in vain to make peace! I felt most horribly worried at the idea.

I began to sort out more seeds. It was all I could think of to do. Unlike Pansy I can never act in an emergency—unless to make the emergency rather more emergent than it was before! I was thankful when she changed the subject herself, though not as I could have wished.

"What an odd name to give your dog—Satan!" she said, and laughed with a determined-not-to-be-shocked air.

"I didn't," I replied heavily. "I tried to change it to something else. I wanted to call him William. I

don't quite know why, it is a name I have always disliked very much. Satan disliked it equally. I could not blame even a *dog* for refusing to be called William."

Mrs. Kearness said nothing. Her face wore a very odd expression, but then so did the faces of all who conversed with me.

It seemed she waited for me to continue the conversation, and in my heavy way I did my best.

"Yes, William and Mary," I said, "dreadful names, I always think."

They had been dreadful to me because the doctor who mauled my adenoids out of me had been called "Old William," and Mary had been the name of Mrs. Clive. Also I could never at school remember the date that William and Mary had come to the throne and what they had done there and why. They had seemed to me a dull and rather spiteful pair, for they did nothing but get me into trouble.

"Detestable, don't you think so?" I asked her, conversationally.

"As they happen to be the name of my husband and myself, I am hardly in a position to judge," she said grimly.

"Good God!" I burst out. Then wiping my face I apologised wildly for everything, my dislike of William and Mary, my profane exclamation.

Once more she changed the subject.

"My husband would have called again, but you know what work Lent means for a clergyman?"

I had no idea what work it meant. "Is it being it *now?*" I demanded feebly. "Easter comes next, of course." I remembered that because Easter had meant

holidays. It was delightful to think that henceforth my life would be all holidays.

"Yes, it *is* being it now," she said rather drily. "And I'm sure it is good for all of us if we would only take it in the right spirit," she added severely.

"Quite so! Quite so!" I agreed readily.

"There are times when a little mortification of the flesh is good for all of us," she said.

"*Whose* flesh?" I asked stupidly.

She eyed me with suspicion. "Personally, I give up sugar."

"Yes, it *is* fattening," I sighed. I liked my things sweet.

"Not for that reason, Mr. Delland," she said frigidly.

"Of course not," I said in a rush. "And I don't think sugar counts as much as potatoes. It's the starch that does it, isn't it?"

"I'm sure I don't know." She was red and angry-looking. And yet she stayed.

"I fear you have a flippant tongue," she said.

I could only stare in speechless amazement. *I*, of all people, with a flippant tongue!

I stood miserably first on one foot, then on the other, hanging my head, growing ever more scarlet. I could only wonder why she did not leave me in disgust.

"I don't *mean* to be flippant!" I said desperately.

"Well, we will say no more about it; perhaps we do not understand each other very well yet, but doubtless that will come."

I couldn't say I wanted it to come without showing myself an obvious liar, so I said nothing.

"You know what we talked about the other day

. . . rather a delicate matter! . . . My husband, I thought, might be useful to you?"

I felt relieved.

"You asked him? He has had personal experience? You have some suggestions? Ramble it *won't!*"

Mrs. Kearness looked at me keenly.

"Your crimson rambler!" she gasped. Her own face was crimson.

I nodded.

"I was not talking of your crimson rambler."

"But *I* was!" I stammered.

"I never know, Mr. Delland," she said severely. "You make things very difficult! Sometimes I feel you are scoffing."

"*Me* scoff!" I gasped.

"I was trying to allude to something much more important in your life, and in the mind of those whose eyes are fixed on you, Mr. Delland, than a mere crimson rambler."

"*Eyes fixed on me!*" I repeated. I felt myself turn very pale. "Surely not! Why!"

"You must answer that question yourself, and I trust take the only course open to you. I do not myself suspect, but I cannot prevent what certain people say. One must walk very warily. You understand, I will say no more." She left me rather abruptly, her face still the colour I wanted my rambler to be.

But I did not understand in the very least. I had, indeed, only just time to snatch my hat from the ground and take it off in farewell.

CHAPTER XIII

'MELIA-HANN INTRODUCES ME TO A BUNDLE

I HAD not seen 'Melia-Hann for so long that I began to fear she had found out what an unsatisfactory person I am as a friend, when suddenly one day I found her at my gate. She looked thinner than ever, and carried an odd-shaped bundle.

Some time ago she had startled me very much by the announcement that her mother "washed the curate every week," adding, "he is very 'igh church, yer know!"

"He *must* be!" I had stammered aghast. I remembered that Mrs. Heriot had warned me as to the strange customs ruling in the country. It seemed a rather shocking one.

"She's washed *all* the curates," 'Melia-Hann had gone on to state in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone, "only some o' them they 'ardly pays you, they run it that fine, but when you get a real 'igh-class, 'igh church, one, like Mr. Steele, then it's a bit of all right, I can tell you! A collar onst a day, his surplices onst, his unders twice a week reglar, a *puffict* gent! Would you like me mother to wash *you?* She's better than a laundry any day."

Mrs. Hopkins now "washes me," and I have no fault

to find. Not to be outdone by Mr. Steele, I changed at least three times a week, and I know I stood very high in the estimation of Mrs. Hopkins. 'Melia-Hann has said so.

It may not be everything, but it is something, to stand high in the estimation of one's washerwoman! It was also pleasant for me to think the sum I paid weekly would help to keep 'Melia-Hann in luxury. She often brought the washing, but usually on a barrow. Mr. Hopkins, however, graciously consented to call for the money. I never, however, paid it to anybody but 'Melia-Hann or her mother.

It occurred to me that 'Melia-Hann was taking some of his possessions to the curate.

"Mr. Steele's, I suppose?" I said.

Amelia began to laugh till I thought she would never stop. "Go hon with your jokes, now do! Good fing Mr. Steele can't 'ear you, 'e's that particular you wouldn't believe! Mother will fairly bust 'erself wiff laffin' when she 'ears. She knows what a puffict cure you is!"

I was pleased that Mrs. Hopkins should appreciate me. I would rather be considered a "cure," than the dull being that I actually am.

I began to gather some flowers. "You haven't been here for ages!" I said reproachfully.

She sighed. "No, I've 'ad me 'ands full. Good fing it was in the 'olidays. Here it is, mister, what do you fink of it?"

She opened the bundle and inside was something alive and dreadful. It was very small and crumpled and red. It made me feel quite queer.

"What is it?" I gasped faintly.

"A boy," she said.

"*A baby!*"

"'Course! What else?"

I didn't know what else, so I said nothing.

"Ten days, though you wouldn't fink it. 'E's a fair misery, ain't 'e? 'Spose 'e'll go the way of the others!"

"What others?" I asked stupidly.

The child pointed to the churchyard.

I shuddered.

"Free," she said quite cheerfully, "but *all* insured! This one was baptised at onst. It makes you look *that* silly if you 'ave to 'ave them put away quiet-like."

I shuddered again.

She covered up its dreadful, aged face, and I breathed once more. Had I been like this? I writhed at the thought.

"How—how is your father?" I asked, plunging for a change of subject.

It was not a fortunate remark.

"'E 'asn't been sober for a week; 'e's never sober when a new baby comes; it puts 'im out somethink crool."

"Dear me!" I said.

She rested the bundle on a rung of the gate and I stepped back a little.

"Father," she announced, "is the bloominest, drunkeniest swine in the whole place."

"Dear me," I said again.

"'Ave yer 'eard about Tommie Burt?" 'Melia-Hann enquired inconsequently. "Lor, *e's* a cure if yer like! 'E was caught pinchin' at the treat."

"Pinching *who?*" I gasped.

"Go hon." She changed the position of her awful bundle. "*Spoons*, av course."

"Really!" I said.

"Yer might well wonder, tin stuff like that! The whole bloomin' lot not worth sixpence! It shows 'ow real vicious 'e is!"

I realised—that from 'Melia-Hann's point of view——it was more vicious to take the valueless than the valuable.

"But *why?*" I asked. It seemed a foolish sort of thing to do, I thought.

"Oh, it's jest a silly 'abit 'e's got!"

It was one way of looking at it! "Rather a bad habit," I said severely. "He should break himself of such habits."

"Oh, 'e's born to be 'anged, a reglar gallus-bird," said 'Melia-Hann easily. "'E'll do somethink really 'orrible afore 'e's done; swim in gore, I shouldn't wonder."

She uttered the words unctuously.

"Mrs. Kearness she talked to 'im an' 'e gived 'em up, an' repented somethink horrid—there still bein' the buns to come—but Miss Soapy she gave 'im what-for-proper, she did!"

I had heard of Miss Soapy before, always in connection with some kind deed, or drastic well-deserved punishment. It seemed a dreadful name for such an evidently estimable lady. This seemingly excellent spinster was "in" at all the births and deaths of the poor, helping somehow. She was evidently a lady who wasted no words, but depended on actions. What anybody so obviously ineffective as the vicar would have done without her, I cannot think. She was plainly

his right hand, "a second curate," though not, I fancy, from what I heard, always of his way of thinking.

"Miss Soapy she's—she's just a treat herself, she is," said 'Melia-Hann, her face alight with enthusiasm. "Folks they mostly love Miss Soapy, 'cept those as are afeard of her, like me father. You should 'ear the fings she's says to 'im, straight talk, I *can* tell yer, and no fine ladylike words he can't get the 'ang of! I've knowed her keep 'im sober for free days; an' when Jimmy Boles, what is only a little fellow though cocky-like, took to beatin' 'is wife, 'er bein' the biggest woman in the place, Miss Soapy she snatched the stick away, and laid into 'im somethink terrible, 'is cries bringing the 'ole place about 'is ears, and then she talked to 'is wife, my! you should have 'eard 'er, an' pointed out 'ow she were much the stronger an' it was a shame of 'er to stand it, and she ought to beat *'im* if 'e tried any of 'is nonsense! An' what's *more*, mister, she give Sally the stick, and said she'd stay there till she seed 'er beatin' the little beast, and Sally she done it 'cos Miss Soapy told 'er, an' the neighbours come and *saw* 'er doin' it, and what's more, mister, she's done it since, 'as Sally Boles, and there's no more nonsense to be 'ad from Jimmy, a puffict lamb, 'e is!"

I admired Miss Soapy as much as I pitied her for having such a name.

I gave 'Melia-Hann the flowers, which she clutched eagerly.

"I thought maybe, you bein' lonely-like, I thought maybe you'd like to 'old the baby for a bit. Folk finds it real *comfortin'* I've 'eard." She thrust the bundle at me.

I almost fell in stepping backwards suddenly. I had

never been in such a frightful fix in my life! How was I to avoid hurting 'Melia-Hann's feelings? She wanted, I could see, to repay me for the flowers.

"I brought 'im special," she went on. "Me mother doesn't believe in lettin' the hair get to them hunder a month, but when she knew it was *you*——"

I gazed wildly round. Oh, for the ready tongue of a liar!

"So it's a boy," I observed trembling.

"Yes. This is the hend you catch holt of."

She pushed it nearer. I was afraid it would fall to the ground between us. Was I to have infanticide on my soul?

"Heaven help me!" I ejaculated under my breath.

Something did, not Heaven I suppose, with a lie. "'Melia-Hann," I said feverishly, "I will tell you the truth (it was awful thus to preface the most barefaced of lies, though I believe it is very usual), "if—if it had been a she-one, a girl, I mean, I should have loved to have held it and everything, but I've always had an awful prejudice against boy babies, perhaps because I was one myself, I believe. I—I should like to, but I really can't."

I wiped my dripping face.

"Lor, who'd 'ave thought it—you bein' such a talker! 'Course lots of folk 'ave queer ideas about babies, some 'ates the sight of them, boy or girl alike, and wouldn't 'old them, no, not for nuffink. My father is like that. Makes 'im sick, 'e says. And then there's Miss Soapy, who carn't abear to 'ave them die, not if they is insured however so! An' you, bein' queer yerself an' a puffict cure, is sure to 'ave some notion too. I must be goin'. I tell you what, you can giv'

'im a kiss if yer like, to show there's no ill-feelin'——"

"The next time, 'Melia-Hann," I said, turning pale.

"There mayn't *be* no next time with us; ours, what wiff one fing an' another, are not what you'd call a lastin' lot. 'Ere you are, mister!"

She uncovered its awful, uncanny face and thrust it through the gate at me.

I suppose I must have fulfilled my part with apparent satisfaction, for when I opened my eyes 'Melia-Hann was trotting contentedly homewards, the bundle held close to her.

I went in and scrubbed my face, and Dorothea was cross—that is to say, cross in her own and quite delightful way, which I don't really mind very much—because I hadn't as much appetite as usual for my dinner.

"Do you like babies, Dorothea?" I asked her.

She stared, then smiled, her eyes very soft. "It depends on the babies, don't it, sir?"

It was an answer that cheered me, brought back my vanished self-respect.

"It does indeed!" I exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIV

PANSY APPEARS

I SUPPOSE it is not really good for you to be without troubles or worries, because then you begin to regard content as a right, rather than as a blessing. At any rate I knew my content was over for the time being, when Pansy swooped down upon me without even the warning of a telegram.

I was just leaning on the gate smoking, blissfully ignorant of disaster, when suddenly an awful sight burst into view—Pansy, deep in earnest conversation with Mrs. Heriot, coming from the station.

Some people have to be told things, others know them by instinct. I knew perfectly well that nobody had told Pansy anything. She just knew by instinct I had sent Mrs. Perkins away and had chosen a housekeeper for myself.

She dismissed Mrs. Heriot, who departed unwillingly —she had evidently taken a great fancy to Pansy— and burst through the gate at me, "*Oh, Edward!*" was all she said.

I braced myself for the battle of wills that I knew was coming.

"No better than she should be, of course?" was her next extraordinary remark.

"Why *should* she be any better than she should be?" I returned to the senseless and incomprehensible question. What was wrong with Mrs. Heriot?

She looked at me strangely, and clasped her hands together in a fashion she has when specially agitated. I was surprised. I had not expected her to take it as badly as this. She looked at me as if I was no better than a criminal, and yet as if she wasn't specially surprised.

I began to feel very put out.

"Sometimes I think you are too *naïf* for words; at other times I wonder if you aren't the most improper man I know!"

It is not pleasant to be thought improper, but I think it is almost worse to be spoken of as *naïf* at forty!

"That you could be so sly! Even James could hardly believe it!"

"Believe what?" I asked bluntly.

"Never will I trust a man again! *All* men are the same, even you!" She looked at me darkly.

"Why, of course," I said puzzled. "*Why* not?"

"You and your pretty young housekeepers!"

"There's only one," I said mildly.

"I should hope so indeed! What next!"

I was glad to remember Dorothea was prepared. Pansy could not drive her away or stay later than the last train.

"You are talking of Dorothea?"

"Of course I am talking of Dorothea—if that is the name of the creature!"

That roused me. "Dorothea isn't a creature," I said firmly.

"*All* creatures are creatures!' insisted Pansy, her

face flushing. "That you should be so little ashamed, so abandoned over it! A flighty young person, to put it politely——"

I didn't consider that putting it politely, and said so, and added, "She has the loveliest blue eyes, and is very economical." Surely the latter quality would appeal to Pansy!

But it didn't. She was prejudiced against Dorothea, as I had guessed she would be. "*Economical!*" The word whistled from her. "They are *never* economical! Of course she makes a perfect fool of you!"

I knew she did, and preferred not to reply to that taunt, instead I said firmly, "Nothing, nobody, shall take her from me!"

Pansy turned quite pale. "*Edward!* Do you know what you are saying!"

"I do, and I mean it. I am quite satisfied. You shall not take my Dorothea from me."

"*Your* Dorothea," she gasped. "Have you no—no decency? You must be infatuated! And I did think *you* were safe! You'll be wanting to marry her next!"

Such an idea had never occurred to me, and I said so. "She wouldn't have me," I said; "she's young and pretty, and I'd rather she remained in her present capacity——"

"And to think I can't get James to believe me! That he'll just laugh when I go home and tell him!"

"I don't like Dorothea being laughed at," I said a little coldly.

"Edward, this cannot continue! It's the talk of the place—if you have no care for yourself, there are James and I and the children to be considered."

Tom, the youngest of the " children " is twenty-four, and very far from being a child. I could not see what it mattered to my heir, and said so. I also pointed out that Dorothea took quite a personal pride in the house and so on. She would not listen. Pansy, perhaps, is not at her best as a listener.

" I don't suppose Dorothea is her real name at all," she said impatiently. " I've never heard of one called Dorothea before."

" I wanted an Ermyntrude one," I owned, " only not after I had seen Dorothea, of course."

" Hush, Edward. How *can* you ! I insist on seeing her. Some day you will thank me for getting you out of it ! "

" I won't be got out of it ! She will go for nobody but me—I made her promise. I am very grateful to Dorothea. For one thing——"

" I refuse to hear another word ! Be quiet, Edward."

" I've never been so thoroughly well looked after in my life——"

" Ring the bell. I will see her here."

I did not ring the bell. " I think you will find her in the housekeeper's room," I said, " at least, *I* always do."

She gave me an exasperated look and flounced out of the room ; it is not a nice word, but it happened to be descriptive.

She was away so long that I got anxious. Was she terrorising Dorothea ? And yet would Dorothea easily be terrorised even by Pansy ? I had to go and see.

I burst rather suddenly into the housekeeper's room. " Please, Dorothea, I'd like tea now," I said.

She said, " Yes, sir," even more respectfully than

usual. Her face was very red and so was Pansy's, but it struck me that the tone of Dorothea's red was more victorious.

Pansy followed me to the library.

"Do you usually have tea at three o'clock?" she said with an odd expression.

I didn't, but I prevaricated. "I have everything how and when I like it," I said. "That's one of the reasons I can't be parted from Dorothea. I consider her a perfect treasure." This was, I know, the correct term to use.

"That remains to be proved," she said stiffly. "I am ready, however, to admit I have done you an injustice. It gave me a great shock—what I fancied, I mean—and the relief is very great."

"What did you fancy?" I asked curiously.

Her face deepened in colour, and after a pause she said, "You have always made things very difficult, Edward, and never more so than lately. You ask the oddest questions, and sometimes one has to wonder if anybody can be so—so ignorant or so dense. But I think you can, and that is better than being dreadfully deep, as I have sometimes feared."

"I chose Dorothea not only for her eyes, but her economy, Pansy; and she makes the most beautiful figures in the little books."

Pansy leaned back in an exhausted fashion. "Oh, Edward, how could you know with *looking* at a person! What do you know of economy? Think of Mrs. Perkins and her——"

"High principles," I concluded.

"Then you came to appreciate them, that is something! But in that case why——"

"Pansy, that woman made me her slave! I had to do exactly what she liked—never what I liked myself. She even said the page-boy—who made faces at me behind my back—was to help me upstairs and put me to bed. She said it was usual."

Pansy stared at me in horror, "Oh, Edward, your manner must have led her to think . . . but no! not you! I cannot suppose it——"

"But she did," I insisted. "Now just look at Dorothea's books."

I poured an armful into her lap. I felt sure she could not fail to be impressed.

She pored over them. They represent her literature. "They seem all right, but unless one could compare them with Mrs. Perkins'?' Let me see those, if you please, Edward. Of course you have them?"

I went red. I did not wish her to see them and learn the truth, and tried to put her off. One cannot, however, put Pansy off. She but becomes the more determined. In this case she found them herself—she knew, indeed, better than I where they were kept.

Well, I did my best, Heaven knows, but in the end she got it all out of me, even unto the loss of the silver!

I think it gave Pansy the greatest shock of her life, it even shook her self-confidence a little. At the same time, she scolded me severely, as if it was all my fault. The victim, it appeared, was most to blame. I *asked* people to cheat me!

"Why talk of Mrs. Perkins? Dorothea is a much nicer subject of conversation?"

"Edward, the whole village is talking of her."

I was delighted it should be so, and said as much.

Pansy sighed in a tired sort of way, and muttered

to herself—a habit she has when peculiarly distracted. "If one knew what to do! *How* to put it! But then if people think that . . ."

"I am very grateful to Dorothea," I broke in quickly. "For one thing, she took me without a character."

She asked me to explain exactly what I meant.

I did so.

She took out one of her little books and said she thought we might as well stroll slowly to the station.

Outside I pointed to the crimson rambler with a sigh. "What would *you* do?" I asked, for though Pansy has no garden, she knows everything by instinct.

"I'd let it alone and see what happens," she said. "I dare say it's been too much meddled with." She investigated it closer. "I expect it will flower this year all right," she said, "and spread in the right direction too."

"Oh, do you think so!" I cried delighted.

"I feel *quite* sure of it."

"Then I know it will!" And it did.

"It seems odd to think I should owe all this to Uncle James," I said.

When Pansy looked at me with her shocked expression, I knew I had done one of two dreadful things—either made mention of a connection recently dead, or alluded to sacred matters on a week-day. A deceased relative must not be spoken of at all till at least a year after his decease, then he must have "poor" prefixed, as if, though his destination were uncertain, one hardly liked to give him the benefit of the doubt. "Religion" was conducted within certain hours on Sunday, and totally ignored on all other days.

"I can't help feeling sometimes he may be envying me," I ventured.

"Edward! As if he isn't better off where he is. *All* dead relations are better off where they are."

I could not, however, altogether picture Uncle James in Pansy's heaven, a place of terrible orthodoxy. He had been a gay, a very gay, old bachelor, with a taste in wine and horses and fair women, which did his judgment every credit, but which Pansy—for one—had thought distinctly shocking. Yet she imagined him contented with his harp.

Down the road we almost ran into Mrs. Kearness. I think she would have liked to stop, but Pansy, who did not seem to see her, was eyeing her watch and saying we had only just time, and hurried me on.

"I think she would have liked to make your acquaintance," I said. "To have called on you."

"I don't let people call on me in the middle of the road; I do not wish to know Mrs. Kearness and make it easier for her. I do not consider that sort of person ought to be encouraged at all. She must make the best of her own foolishness. I trust you are not getting friendly with her, Edward."

"Friendly, why we are hardly on speaking terms! I seem to offend her each time she speaks to me. It's unfortunate."

"*All* misfortunes aren't as unfortunate as they look," returned Pansy. "Avoid her much, and the daughters more."

"Certainly," I promised readily.

Curiously enough, on my return I met Mrs. Kearness again. She had a very beautiful girl with her, tall and

stately, with dark hair, dark haughty eyes, a pale skin and perfect features.

She alarmed me very much.

I was even more alarmed when Mrs. Kearness—who it seemed had forgiven me again—stopped, and said, "My eldest daughter, Grace."

I shook hands with Miss Grace Kearness when I found I was keeping her waiting, but I had never felt so awkward in my life. She was so beautiful—and so very tall, much taller than I! It makes a man feel such an extra worm. Her manner and English were so perfect, that I felt in the presence of one vastly superior, and got away as quickly as I could. In spite of her gracious smiles and words, I knew quite well what she must really have been thinking of me all the time.

The next day I met the second daughter, Miss Kathleen, with Mrs. Kearness, and was introduced to *her*. She was perfect too, in face and figure, in manner and everything, and I was more alarmed than ever. The fourth and fifth daughters, though grown-up, are very young indeed, and not quite so exquisitely finished. At present they giggle a little, though they try very hard not to. I think the youngest is almost the tallest and most beautiful—a very dazzling creature. Sometimes I meet them all together, and then I am absurdest of all. There is Grace and Kathleen, first and second, and then, it seems, come the fourth and fifth, Gladys and Doris. I think if I met the middle one, too, it would be almost the end of me—at least if I meet the five together! When I think of all that youth and charm and beauty belonging to one house I want to congratulate Mrs. Kearness, though I never find the courage. It seems quite marvellous.

They are like their mother, I think, for Mr. Kearness is not a pleasing type, he has a round face with very blunt features, dark brown freckles, and ginger hair. He is short and stumpy, and has hands and feet rather out of proportion.

I should think Mrs. Kearness is very glad her lovely daughters have taken after her. It would be hard for a girl, I fancy, to have to take after Mr. Kearness in *any* way. I do not imagine he is either clever or at all charming, though I believe he is considered well-meaning.

Mrs. Kearness must have been very kind and unselfish to marry him.

CHAPTER XV

'MELIA-HANN INTRODUCES ME TO THE HISTORIC "MISS SOAPY"

I AM always finding out something fresh to the credit of women. It seems to me that in the matter of myself they have been more kind and gracious than any words of mine can say. I came to Moss End with nothing to recommend me, not even a wife—a dull, plain bachelor of forty—and instead of ignoring my existence, as I fully expected, all the ladies of the place have almost gone out of their way to make my acquaintance. I must seem quite hopeless to them, bright, gay creatures that they are! and yet they persevere just the same. I think that I know some twenty-nine ladies, all of them most charming in every way. It is very wonderful. I wish I had the courage to accept their good-natured invitations to tea or garden-parties, but alas! the habit of years is not to be lightly broken! I am still a recluse, although against my better judgment.

I am much more at my ease with Dorothea or 'Melia-Hann than with any of the ladies of Hill Land. With the twenty-nine ladies I am dumb, leaving them to carry on all the conversation, but with 'Melia-Hann or Dorothea I become quite talkative.

But it was beginning to seem as if 'Melia-Hann had

deserted me again, and for good this time, when to my great relief she put in an appearance.

Her genial "Hullo, mister!" sent my spirits up at once.

"Hullo!" I returned heartily. "You have not been here for a very long time."

"I've 'ad me 'ands full."

"And what was it this time?" I enquired.

"A buryin'" she said importantly.

Then I saw she had a black band round her arm, and wished I had not asked. I supposed it was the grandmother she had talked to me about, a very old, bed-ridden person with nothing but her old-age pension, and nobody nearer left than the unworthy Bill Hopkins and his family.

"Yes, we put 'im away this mornin'; the finest fun'ral we ever 'ad—the baby, yer know."

"Oh!" was all I found to say. I could not truthfully express sorrow, for it seemed to me the unfortunate little thing was well out of the world that awaited him. There were already so many, and Hopkins scarcely shone as a father.

I wished, however, that 'Melia-Hann would change the subject; she can be rather crude.

"I'd 'ave begged some of your white flowers, mister, but I've been that rushed, you wouldn't believe the work they gives you—fun'rals!"

"Really! It's very sad!" I murmured unhappily. I saw she would resent a change of subject. She bore an air of rather proud importance.

"Well . . . we 'ad 'im insured. Most times there's a little left after the fun'ral, and we did better'n usual this time. Takin' one thing wiff another,

we've made on it, and that's always *somethink*, mister!"

I was too staggered for reply.

"An' it couldn't be 'elped, neither, mother an' me we sat up wiff 'im night after night, an' give 'im anyfink we could fink of to tempt his appetite, but there, we'd knowed all the time we wasn't goin' to rear 'im. 'E 'ad the *look*, mister, you know?"

I didn't; neither did I wish to.

"Granny an' mother they've 'ad words. Granny says *'er's* lasted, and she never buried a child, let alone a baby; that though they was all took save Bill, it was God's will, an' not owin' to bein' weakly 'uns."

I seized upon a chance of changing the subject to ask what her brothers did to help at home.

"Loaf an' drink," she returned. "The only job they cares for is one in a pub close to the tap. One of 'em, 'e's a carter, carts beer—*hinside* and hout, mister!" She laughed sardonically.

"It must make it very difficult?" I ventured.

"Yes," she returned briefly, "I 'ave me 'ands full." She seemed eager to change the conversation. "Father, 'e was for 'avin' a day hoff in the pub, 'im bein' hupset about the baby dyin', but Miss Soapy she 'ad 'im hout through John Smith, who's a big strong man who would do anyfink for Miss Soapy—she 'avin' 'elped 'is wife through twins—and took what 'e'd saved of the 'surance money hoff 'im, 'im shellin' hout like a lamb! She 'as the nerve; hit was a proper sell for father, 'im bein' made to look so soft too!"

My respect for this strong-minded and most courageous spinster rose higher than ever. I do not say I wished to know her—she sounded almost too alarming

for that—but I certainly should have liked to see her at a safe distance.

"She must be a wonder!" I said.

"Of course. 'Aven't you seen 'er yet?"

"No, unfortunately."

"You would like to know 'er proper?"

I had to say I would. After all, there was little danger of my ever doing so.

'Melia-Hann gave a skip of excitement. "Well, *now*, if that isn't lucky! Why, 'ere *is* Miss Soapy. Miss Soapy! Miss Soapy! Please come 'ere an' be interdooced to my gent, 'e's been adyin' to know yer for hages! We's always talkin' of you, 'im an' me. 'E'll make you laff proper, 'e will, 'e's such a one for 'is jokes—a reglar cure an' *no* herror! 'Ere's 'is 'and"—she had grabbed my trembling, shrinking hand—"just shake, will yer, and say, 'Hullo, mister!'"

I shut my eyes, though somehow I had managed to put my hat on and take it off. I was afraid, once face to face with this magnificent but alarmingly Amazonian spinster, that I should sink through the earth, and be convicted in her strong-minded eyes of utter wormishness.

My hand was taken in a strong, warm grasp, and a voice that laughed, and yet sang in my ears like a wonderful song, said, "Hullo, mister!"

I opened my eyes and gasped.

I was face to face with the loveliest girl I had ever seen! Miss Soapy was quite young, and very, very beautiful, and the most indescribably extraordinary feelings came over me. I literally did not know whether I was standing on my head or my heels—or very much else. I only know I was grasping my hat in one hand,

and with the other clinging to her hand as a drowning man clings to a straw.

All women make me feel queer, but none had ever made me feel so queer as Miss Soapy did. It wasn't entirely an unpleasant sort of queerness. I wanted to run away very much, but then, again, I didn't; in fact, I wanted to stay even more than I wanted to run away.

How shall I describe her? Eyes and hair the colour of dark honey, and honey-coloured freckles. Her nose was adorable rather than imposing or classical, a very friendly sort of nose, and she had a dimple when she smiled. She was exactly the right height and the right shape. She was, indeed, too wonderful for words. I was delighted to meet her, and not at all frightened; in fact, I wanted to spend the rest of my life meeting her.

I heard a queer, husky voice I did not recognise, saying, "Hullo, Miss Soapy!"

Then I gasped in deepest shame and self-disgust. What would she think of me? She would never speak to me again!

But she only laughed—her lovely, musical laugh—and said in such a demure way, "My *real* name is Sophonisba, you know."

And then, indeed, I knew and understood.

She was called *Sophonisba!*

CHAPTER XVI

THE INCOMPARABLE SHE

"SOPHONISBA KEARNESS," she added.

"Are *you* the third Miss Kearness?" I exclaimed, "Oh, *surely* not!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I dare say it seems odd, after the others—people mostly think so—but it's a fact, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately!" I echoed, "oh, don't say that!"

When I thought of such a perfect girl, with such a perfect name being called "Soapy," my blood almost boiled over. It was little short of an infamy.

"Do you know, I thought you were an elderly spinster," I gasped.

"Well, I shall be some day, I suppose. People never believe I am one of the Kearnesses at first."

"I don't wonder," I said; "I didn't myself. You—you are so *different*, don't you know."

I could not, of course, explain that she was different by being far, far more beautiful than all the beautiful Misses Kearness put together. I do not wish to disparage Sophonisba's sisters, but you could not put them in the same street with her. She had quite a different way of speaking, and one felt no awe of her at all.

She frowned just a trifle when I said how different

she was. She was the sort of girl to under-value herself, and over-value her sisters.

"One gets a bit fed up with the old, old story," she said, rather shortly. "I'm sure I never *asked* to be different. It was just my luck all over! Some people get front seats when looks are given out, and others are behind the door."

I gazed at her as admiringly as I dared. I calculated she must have been in the middle of the first row, and got served first.

I thought it nice of her to feel sorry that her sisters had not been quite as much to the fore—not that they had any cause of complaint. I said as much.

"Everybody can't be in the first row," I said consolingly, "but some make a good second or third, and surely that's good enough."

She smiled at me ever so nicely, and her dimple flashed out. "Oh, do you think so! People—relations and things!—think it funny to say, 'I suppose you saw "House full" up, and went away again?' But it's not very funny the first time, and the hundredth it's just *disgustin'*."

"Yet, I suppose, it's true enough," I said, regretfully. My glass told me *I* must have seen 'House full' up.

"You needn't rub it in," she spoke quite crossly. "At any rate, it might be worse; it's not as if it was humps or squints, or bow legs!"

I coloured. Certainly, I had none of these special disabilities, and I was grateful, though embarrassed, that she should notice it and try and comfort me.

"It's always something to remember how much worse even a bad job could be," I said cheerfully.

"You are very frank," she said after a long pause

"Why did they say you were shy? I think you are the very *un*shyest man I ever met."

I thought it was more than kind that she should say this.

"I don't feel shy with you, Miss——," I paused. I did not want to call her Miss Kearness, but I dared not hope she would let me call her Miss Sophonisba.

"Everybody calls me just Soapy," she said.

"They ought to be shot!" I said hotly. "It's an outrage!"

She laughed.

"Must I call you the third or the middle Miss Kearness?" I asked. "It's a little muddling when there are five, is it not?"

"It's worse than muddlin'," she burst out. "Poisonous, *I* call it! What right have parents to have five daughters at all, let alone one like me! There ought to be a law against it! Two girls are enough in any family, and that's one too many, to my way of thinkin'!"

"But, surely . . ." I stammered slightly, "I have thought . . . so delightful! How Mrs. Kearness is to be envied with all that youth and beauty in the house!"

She stared at me hard. "I suppose you are gettin' at me?"

I did not understand. I saw that in some way I had displeased. "*Oh*, Miss Sophonisba!" I exclaimed, aghast.

"People don't 'Miss' me, 'cept the villagers," she said, curtly, "I'm just Soapy. Call me plain Sophonisba—it suits me well enough, *goodness* knows!"

"It does indeed!" I agreed with fervour, and added bravely, "Sophonisba."

" Ain't 'e a cure ? " burst out 'Melia-Hann. " Wasn't I tellin' yer now ! "

I started, for I had forgotten 'Melia-Hann ; indeed, forgotten everything in the world save Sophonisba. But 'Melia-Hann hadn't forgotten me. During the conversation she had maintained the air of a showman in the background watching his dog go through his tricks as per advertisement. I was 'Melia-Hann's protégé ; she was anxious that I should show off and do her credit. Woe is me, that cannot do even a 'Melia-Hann credit !

Sophonisba turned kindly to the sharp little creature. " Your friend is indeed a novelty ! " she said.

I don't know whether I was pleased or not. 'Melia-Hann certainly wasn't.

" Don't you go a-callin' of my gent names, now, don't 'e, Miss Soapy. 'E 'as 'is feelin's same as folks what isn't queer in their yeads."

" I'm *not* queer in my head, really, I'm not, Sophonisba ! " I pleaded passionately.

" Of course not ! " she said.

" You're a 'centric an' a scuse, mister ! " 'Melia-Hann reminded me.

" People have thrust that rôle upon me against my will," I said wildly, " I have never wanted to be either."

" I quite understand," said Sophonisba. " People *are* idiots, aren't they ? "

" Well, it's time I 'opped it," said 'Melia-Hann suddenly. " There's lots for me to put straight at 'ome, I can tell yer. Give us one of them roses, will yer, mister ? "

I gave her several.

She divided the bunch in half and gave the finest to Sophonisba. "Now, Miss Soapy," she said archly, "don't you go an' say as I've never gived you anyfing, an' you can go 'alves in my gent if yer like!"

Sophonisba looked at me and went a lovely pink, and gave her lovely laugh.

I laughed too. I had never felt so light-hearted or so light-headed in my life.

To my joy Sophonisba accepted the roses and stuck them into her belt. "Thanks," she said; "Moss End has the loveliest roses in Hill Land."

"I hope you'll regard them as yours," I stuttered eagerly.

She opened her honey-coloured eyes very wide. "Oh, perhaps now and then I'll share with 'Melia-Hann. Rose-growing is rather too much of a luxury for us, and then, of course, the others need them, they do the dressin' up and trottin' round. I'm not much of a hand socially, as I dare say you can see for yourself." She gave an odd sigh.

But I did not see it and said as much. "You're the first girl—except Dorothea—I've talked to without trying to run away from, and making a fool of myself generally. Women are so lovely and delightful, but the more beautiful they are the more frightened I get of them——"

Sophonisba did not leave me time to finish. "Oh, then, of course, you need not be the least frightened of me!" she broke in.

"Oh no," I said, truth compelling me to add, "or, at least only a very little frightened."

"I will try and be grateful for that little," said Sophonisba, a remark that puzzled me.

'Melia-Hann broke in again with a, "Well, so long, mister, keep yer 'air on!" She departed swiftly.

I felt the thin spot and sighed.

"The villagers are very independent," said Sophonisba apologetically. "But 'Melia-Hann is a wonder, a regular little champion. What they would all do without her I can't think. She simply runs the place, arranges everythin'. Who is Dorothea?"

"My housekeeper," I said eagerly, "she's so young and pretty, Sophonisba" (I liked to say Sophonisba as often as possible), "and has the nicest blue eyes."

"I'm sure she has! Why shouldn't people have nice people to look at, just because people say things? Rot, *I* call it! Don't you mind 'em, you hang on to Dorothea whatever they say!"

"Indeed I shall! She's just everything that's perfect, and *so* economical."

"Oh . . . do you go in for that sort of thing, economy, I mean? Such a bore if you needn't."

"I know nothing about it," I confessed gleefully, "and care less! I say it because it sounds well. Pansy—my sister-in-law—seems to think that economy matters more than blue eyes; *I* don't."

"A man wouldn't!" said Sophonisba with a laugh. "Odd how men always rave about blue eyes! Grace's are blue, but you will have noticed?"

I had to own I hadn't.

"I'm sure I must have seen Dorothea; she has corn-coloured hair, and is a big, fine young woman. I think she has been to church. One notices a newcomer at once in such a congregation as ours, even when it is only a woman. She is awfully pretty."

"Yes, indeed," I cried. "If only she and Angus

would get on better! But they have taken a most violent dislike to each other."

"Angus? Oh, of course you mean Macdonald? He is your gardener? I know him quite well."

"Not my gardener," I said hastily, "the man who gardens." I explained the situation.

Sophonisba at once understood and quite agreed. She knew the garden quite well and loved it, for she had seen a great deal of the young wife who had died so sadly.

"How's the crimson rambler?" she asked in a most friendly and intimate way.

"Oh, it's *going* to ramble," I said gleefully, "Pansy has said so! But won't you come and look round?" I held the gate open eagerly.

She hesitated. "There's a nest of blue-tits," I added persuasively, "the parent bird lets me help to feed them in a sort of way! Oh, Sophonisba, they are so—so awfully pretty and funny!"

"The creatures now!" exclaimed Sophonisba in a wholly delightful way. She looked at the gate and down the road. In the distance I recognised the retreating back of the vicar. We could see him, but—I was thankful to remember—he could not see us.

"Well," murmured Sophonisba, as if she was speaking to herself, "a face like a spotted ham, hair like frizzled ginger, nose just a squashed button, mouth like a letter-box, hand and feet belonging to a hippopotamus, and a waist as thick as the head——"

I recognised the graphic description. It was Mr. Kearness to the life! But it seemed odd that she should so describe him—even to herself. There was a sort of pitying weariness in her voice. I felt she was

awfully sorry for her poor father. I began to feel a little sorry for him myself. He is almost *more* than unfortunate-looking.

Then she seemed to pull herself together, went her lovely pink, and said in a sort of defiant way—for I still held the gate persuasively open—"Well, why not? Bein' different ought to have *some* compensation! Yes, I'll come and be blowed to it! 'Tanyrate your hedges are so jolly high, nobody can see in!"

We went round the garden, and Sophonisba knew all about everything, though quite in a different sort of way from Pansy, and told me lots of things. I let her see how awfully ignorant I was. I said I should never be able to make a success of the garden without plenty of hints.

"What's that big bed by the gate for?" she asked me.

How I hated having to tell her! "Bachelors' Buttons," I sighed.

"It's too late this year," she said.

"I know; your mother told me; but it won't be too late next, will it?"

"Not if you do the right thing at the right time."

"You will show me?" I asked eagerly.

"Certainly. You are fond of them?"

"I don't know; I haven't seen them that I know of, only they seem so *suitable* somehow, Sophonisba."

"Yes, I think they are," she agreed, thoughtfully.

After we had done the garden very thoroughly, I begged her to come and see Dorothea.

She looked rather taken aback. "Why?" she asked, "not to the house?"

As a matter of fact, though I wanted her to see

Dorothea, I wanted her to see the drawing-room more, and to see her in it most of all. I could not but feel it would suit Sophonisba.

We were close by the big windows opening on to the lawn. "This is the shortest way," I said artfully. It wasn't *actually* the longest.

"I suppose I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb," she said, and walked up the steps.

When she got inside she gasped and stared round in a puzzled sort of way, and then at last said in a queer, choked voice, "I didn't know that anything in the world could be so beautiful! I don't believe even the Queen has a room like this! And the pictures, oh, Mr. Delland, where did you get them, who painted them?"

I nearly burst with joy and pride as I owned that I had done them myself.

"You must be a genius," said Sophonisba, staring at me in almost a frightened sort of way. "I wish I hadn't come!"

I unhooked the pictures and collected them into a big heap. "Angus shall take them for you," I said.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"If you like them you must have them," I answered firmly.

"Do you chuck your pictures at every chance stranger?"

"Of course not. Pansy wanted me to sell them! I would sooner have died in the workhouse, I told her."

"But you suggest I should have them!"

"That's different. I could not give them to anybody else."

Sophonisba looked out of the window. She has a

voice just like a bird, and it sounded like one singing after rain, as she said, though very gently, "And you cannot give them to me either, Mr. Delland. Please hang them up again at once!"

"Oh, Sophonisba, just one!"

"No."

"*Never*?" asked I desperately.

I wanted her to have something of mine dreadfully. I suppose it was rather a selfish wish, for the absurd hope was there, that when she looked at it, she might give a passing thought to the owner.

"If I did one *specially*?" I pleaded. I remembered she had said, "The creatures now!" to the last I had done—lambs playing in an orchard.

But she would not promise.

I showed her everything in the drawing-room, and seemed never to have known what appreciation meant before. I pointed out the rosewood tea-table, told her of the quaint old china and silver that goes with it.

She looked at me rather curiously, I thought, "And when do you use it?" she asked.

I went most frightfully red.

"Oh, I *never* use it!" I stammered.

"Then what did you get it for?"

"I don't know," I lied.

There's a long old glass, cunningly inlet in a corner to reflect an odd angle, and, of course, anybody passing. When I found myself in front of it I moved away hurriedly, I did not want to recall to Sophonisba more often than need be the awful contrast between us. She moved away even more quickly than I, which I thought showed a very beautiful spirit. She tried to save me as much as possible. I could not have blamed

her if she had remained there admiring herself and thinking how dreadful I was, though doubtless useful as a foil.

"I don't care much for mirrors," I said, "but the young man carried the point, and of course—well—it might have something better to reflect now and then——"

"It's to be hoped so!" said Sophonisba shortly. "I trust it is not goin' to break from shock!"

I'm afraid my smile was a little feeble as I said I supposed it *was* almost enough to make it.

"I think I'll see Dorothea now and go home," said Sophonisba, and I could see that she was tired.

"Will you come and have tea some day?" I burst out with a courage that amazed myself.

I don't seem altogether responsible for my words or thoughts when I am with Sophonisba. It is as if something much rarer than wine has gone to my head. Perhaps it is the drink of the gods, and I am intoxicated because I am drinking it late in life, and have taken a very long draught indeed. In other words, I have had the unparalleled audacity to fall most hopelessly in love with Sophonisba. Of course it is my own secret, and I intend it shall always remain so. Nobody, least of all Sophonisba—or Pansy!—will ever guess what has happened. I shall dissemble as man never dissembled before.

I introduced the two belles, and I think they took a great liking to each other. Dorothea performed an elaborate curtsey, and little pleased smiles came into her blue eyes as she looked from one of us to the other and said, "Your servant, Miss Soapy."

For once I was not pleased with Dorothea, and after I

had escorted my visitor off the premises—she would not let me come outside the gate—I spoke almost severely to her.

"*Miss Soapy!*" I said reproachfully, "I would not have believed it of you, Dorothea. Does one call angels Soapy?"

Dorothea gasped, and then she said it was because Miss Soapy was such a real-human-like angel, and such a dear young lady that she had felt obliged to call her —like everybody else—"Miss Soapy."

"Not everybody else," I corrected. "She will always be Sophonisba to *me*!"

"'Deed, an' I hope she will, sir!" said Dorothea heartily. But even Dorothea won't be allowed to guess my secret.

CHAPTER XVII

I LEARN MORE OF SOPHONISBA

BEING so much in love with Sophonisba makes me feel very guilty towards Mrs. Kearness. I am no better than a villain in my thoughts, for if there were the slightest chance of such a miracle coming to pass, I would take Sophonisba from her with utter ruthlessness. I hoped I should not come across her. I did not want her to know I had made friends with the flower of the flock, because she would, naturally, at once try to put a stop to it. I do not say I blamed her, but I determined to circumvent her if possible.

She cannot possibly approve of me in any way, I haven't a single thing to recommend me ; indeed, it is simply absurd to think of my having a young girl for a friend at all. Any mother would resent it.

She would tell me she simply wouldn't have it, and I should know myself to be in the wrong, and quite determined to continue in my wrong-doing as long as Sophonisba would let me.

To think of the interview at all brings the perspiration out on my forehead. I spend my time dodging Mrs. Kearness and looking out for Sophonisba. Twice I have succeeded, owing to over-caution, in dodging Sophonisba and finding Mrs. Kearness ! I have come

to the conclusion that it takes practice to do this sort of thing successfully, and I have had none. It is a trifle late to learn at forty.

Still I *am* getting a little better at it, because the other day I happened to be comfortably under the hedge when Mrs. Kearness and the four Miss Kearnesses came down the road, and dawdled a little in passing my gate.

In the end I met Mrs. Kearness face to face at my gate, owing to looking the other way for Sophonisba. I saw there was no escape, wondered feverishly if she had guessed anything, and took my hat off in a furtive fashion. I could *feel* that it was in a furtive fashion, and that my smile was a horrible sickly sort of an affair.

I tried to prevent myself from hanging my head and blushing guiltily, and indeed I forced myself to eye her with almost a brazen air. She talked of Dorothea, and I endeavoured to explain to her that Dorothea explained herself; but she did not seem to be convinced when she eventually left me.

"It's a censorious world!" she said suddenly.

I gazed at her in astonishment. It was such an inconsequent sort of thing to say, and not very true; at least I had never found the world *at all* censorious.

I said as much.

She made an impatient movement. "The person concerned is always the last to hear," she said. "There's a great deal of talk about your housekeeper——"

"Did you notice her blue eyes?" I asked eagerly. "I picked her for her eyes, Mrs. Kearness."

She gave a sigh, and looked very tired. "Has it never occurred to you that she may almost be *too* young and pretty?" she asked.

It seemed an odd question. "How can *any* woman be too young and pretty?" I asked, astonished.

Mrs. Kearness made jabs with her umbrella. "And she's a pretty young woman ruling your household, absolute control they say——"

"Yes," I said thankfully. "You have no idea how well she suits the housekeeper's room! You know I designed it specially for a young and pretty one—an Ermyntrude-one—and the wallpaper is just the colour to go with her eyes."

Mrs. Kearness made more jabs. "Nobody," she said almost solemnly, "could know you, Mr. Delland, and misunderstand, but your character——"

"Dorothea took me *without* a character," I returned quickly. "I was very grateful to her, because, of course, it would have been very difficult to get one——"

"You mean, of course, you took *her* without one. It was what I was afraid of," she spoke nervously.

"Oh no," I said staring, "what a very odd idea! But won't you come and see Dorothea?"

"Some other day, Mr. Delland," she said a little stiffly. "I'm rather pressed for time this morning."

When next I met Sophonisba I was rather surprised at her first words.

"Don't you mind mother," she said, "*I* never do!"

I was all crimson confusion at sight of her. "Oh—er—*don't* you?" I stammered. It seemed wonderful that Sophonisba should have such courage as well as all the other virtues. She was much braver than I; I really minded Mrs. Kearness rather a lot.

"No, nor the pater either. Once you start givin' in to them they are all for takin' advantage, so I never *started*. I suppose she's been talkin' about Dorothea.

I thought *that* was her little game. Met her Waterloo with Dorothea, I shouldn't wonder! That young woman can stand up to most people, I fancy."

"What a charming woman your mother is, Sophonisba!" I knew she must be, because she was the mother of Sophonisba.

Sophonisba stared at me, but she didn't say anything.

"Her kind interest is such a great honour," I added.

"Glad you think so! Everybody wouldn't! Yes, she *does* take quite an interest in you, Mr. Delland!"

She looked at me oddly.

"And your father too," I went on. I did not know him, but that was beside the question. I did not feel that I should like him any the *more* for knowing him. It was rather in the *abstract* that I was so attached to the parents of Sophonisba.

"What an original man you must be!" returned Sophonisba. "Now *we* think the pater rather fussy in the house, and more than a bit off in the pulpit! But of course you don't come to the house or the church. You strike it lucky—*we* don't!"

She sighed.

It seems to me it must take a very beautiful and clear-sighted nature to see the faults of those nearest and dearest; but then undoubtedly Sophonisba was extraordinarily gifted.

"Come to think of it," she went on, "there's not much fun in bein' a clergyman's daughter when you're not the pi. sort by nature. Now, I can get along with bodies all right, but you've got me bunkered when it comes to souls! 'Course it works fairly well between us, the pater takes the souls and I the bodies. He *does* work hard too, and sacrifices no end, but seems

to me souls take a lot of findin' ; now father insists they all have 'em, even Bill Hopkins, and that you've got to go *tryin'* to reach 'em, but *I* just give 'em beans instead ! I smack the bad little boys, and you'd be horrified if you heard the things I say to Bill Hopkins, but he doesn't understand any other language, and there you are ! 'Course it's not ladylike, but then I'm a long sight off bein' a lady, as you must have noticed——"

" I cannot allow you to say such a thing——" I began warmly.

She took no notice. " You see it simply wasn't worth while spendin' any money on *my* education. I hated books an' stuff, an' bein' so different, it would have been a waste——"

" You wouldn't need it, the same, of course," I said admiringly.

" I think I needed it more," she contradicted. " One must have *something* to shove oneself along in this silly old world ! What the dickens have *I* got, I'd like to know ! "

" Oh, *Sophonisba !* " was all I could say in protest. What *hadn't* she got !

" Now the others . . . they were born married. One sees girls like that—it must be rather nice ! " she added thoughtfully.

" To be married ? " I burst out eagerly. " Oh, I think it would be *delightful !* "

" So do I," sighed Sophonisba. " I've always thought it, though I've pretended not to. One doesn't want to look too much of a silly ass ! Fancy me ever bringin' it off. Wouldn't people laugh ! I wonder why I talk to you like this ? S'pose you must be different, too,

in some way, an' it's so jolly to have a friend! I've never had a friend. You see there hasn't been much time for one thing, an' then for another I'm not struck much on women—too many at home I suppose—an' you know, Mr. Delland, it's not much fun sittin' round when the others talk of their new frocks an' becomin' hats, an' their young men. Makes you feel a bit of an ass, an' very much out of it!"

"But why don't you talk of yours, too?" I asked, astonished. And then I realised how it was—Sophonisba was much too modest and kind-hearted to do anything of the sort. She would not wish to have the others envy her.

"My *what?*" she asked, staring very hard at me.

"Your new frocks and becoming hats, and—and young men," I said blushing. I wondered how many she had and which she favoured.

She looked at me up and down, and said crossly, "I never have new frocks, no becoming hat is *becoming* to me—naturally; as for young men——" she stopped and burst out laughing.

I was hanging breathless on the last words. It seemed to me a good sign that she could laugh at their pretensions, knowing them all unworthy. "Amelia *is* right," she concluded, "you are what she calls a 'cure,' but don't you go gettin' at *me*. I don't like it. I know humorous sort of people are makin' fun to themselves all the time at friends and relations—specially at relations!—but I'd rather call our friendship off and be done with it, Mr. Delland. It isn't much fun for the frog, you know——"

"Oh, Sophonisba, how can you suppose such a thing for a minute!" I cried in an agony. "How

can I do anything but admire and look up to you! Why, people make fun of me, not I of them! I don't even know how to. Please don't say you won't be my friend any longer! I—I simply couldn't bear it."

She did not say anything for some time, but just looked puzzled and thoughtful, and then she asked me how old I was.

"Thirty-nine," I said with considerable satisfaction, for I would hardly be so young next week, but a really middle-aged person.

"It sounds a lot," she said. "I'm twenty-two."

My heart sank. It was indeed a terrible difference, and in a day or two it would be even worse! Eighteen years! There is no bridging a span like that.

"I don't feel it," I said desperately. It was a lie. I felt it all and more. Indeed when I looked down at Sophonisba's fresh youth and beauty—for I can look down at her quite a long way, thank heaven!—I felt a hundred.

"You ought to be feeling like my father——" she began.

"Oh, I don't feel in the *least* like your father, Sophonisba!" I exclaimed anguished. I might almost be old enough, but surely, oh, surely, she could not think me quite as awful as Mr. Kearness!

"'Stead of which," she went on as if I hadn't interrupted her, "I feel more like your mother."

"Oh, don't say that!" I implored her, for that was even less satisfactory.

"One can't help feelin's," she said. "Of course you are provided for, which makes a difference, but I expect you go throwin' your money about anyhow."

"Oh, no," I said, "at least I don't think so. Angus

and Dorothea won't let me," I added a little peevishly. "And I do *so* love spending money."

"How odd!" she exclaimed "I thought people who had it, *hated* spendin' it, and only people who hadn't it, spent for all they were worth! I've never done either." She sighed a little.

"It would be ideal to have *somebody* to spend it on," I said in a low voice. "You can't think how I have hankered to buy women's hats."

I found great pleasure in confessing all my foolish little weaknesses to Sophonisba. I had a feeling she would look upon them as kindly as could be.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed, opening her eyes at me. "How lovely, for——" then she pulled herself up suddenly, and the light went out of her face.

"Do you think it very pernicious?" I ventured.

"Hardly that—from a woman's point of view. Lots of men raise Cain. I had a friend who got married," she spoke as if it was an extraordinary thing. "Very smart and pretty, but no money; she married a man she thought had lots, and was goin' to be awfully well-dressed an' that. She didn't bother about gettin' much of a trousseau."

"And *is* she very well-dressed?" I asked idly.

"She's hardly dressed at all," said Sophonisba, with indignation, "or at least so she *says*. In her last letter she said she hadn't a single thing to wear, and added, 'As far as I can see, husbands expect their wives to grow feathers.'"

"Abominable!" I said hotly. "It ought to be a privilege!"

"Bachelors look at it like that—as long as they're *bachelors*," said Sophonisba rather drily. "Funny

how such an interestin' thing as a nice bachelor turns into a horrid dull husband, isn't it ? One can mostly tell husbands, I think, *by* their dullness—after the first newness, I mean, of course."

" Oh, it's *bachelors* that are dull ! " I exclaimed.

Sophonisba laughed. Then she said that if she were a man—which she'd often wished—never, *never* would she marry anything so silly and unexciting as a woman. " I should go on bein' a gay bachelor all the time," she added, almost viciously.

" Oh, *Sophonisba !* " I gasped.

" What rot we are talkin', aren't we ? What did we start at ? Oh, earnin' livin's, an' beastly things like that. Now the others, if the worst came to the worst, could teach children up to ten or twelve, but I could only teach 'em up to five—an' *then* I'd teach 'em wrong, an' get the boot in a week ! It's a bright look-out, isn't it ? It's rough on the poor old pater too, he's not sharp or brainy, but he *has* done his best, and naturally he didn't expect to be let in for five grown-up daughters at home ! No man would. It keeps me awake at nights thinkin' of it, and in the day-time I have to pretend it's all right to everybody, and will work out A1. It's no end of a relief to pour my worries all over you. I'll take yours in return, so that's fair, isn't it ? "

I could not bear to think of her worried or staying awake at night, and did not in the least understand. Why should her sisters teach—a far from pleasant occupation, as I knew ? I asked her what she worried *about.*

" Everythin'," she groaned. " Just look at facts for yourself. Seven grown people livin' on £200 a year, which might stop any day——"

"£200 a year—impossible!" I gasped. "Why, it couldn't be done! Is that all your father gets for his hard work? It's disgraceful!"

"There are others gettin' even less. Yes, it means paupin' along, for there are things in the parish too. I sometimes wonder how we *do* it, but mother and father are awfully unselfish an' self-sacrificin'. If eligibles——" She checked herself suddenly. "Our relations are so sickenin'," she went on indignantly, "millions of 'em, an' all as poor, or poorer, than ourselves; what *use* are relations like that? They oughtn't to be allowed! There's nobody to give us a leg up but our godmother, an' *she's* rather an eccentric old bird. She had Grace and Kathleen up, but nothing happened, which made it worse, for we looked so *silly!* Of course, it's really my turn next, but she'll miss that when she knows the sort *I* am. It would be a waste, wouldn't it? Imagine me doing the Society biz during the London season! Mother asked her to be godmother to all of us because she's no daughters of her own, and her sons are married, and she went to school with mother and married a duke. Fancy one friend marryin' a duke, an' another a man like father! I don't know how mother can *bear* to think of it, an' she was much lovelier as a girl; but there you are, some families have all the luck, and others all the kicks! It comes rather expensive goin' up on the trot, for the duchess doesn't care to stump up much for clothes, an' we have to go up as decent as possible, an' then to have all the expense for nothin'! *That* was a blow, and so unexpected! As a matter of fact, we'd fixed the bridesmaids an' the frocks an' everythin', an' practisin' sayin', 'My sister, Lady So-and-So, or the Duchess of

B.' Why Grace *looks* like a duchess already! Men make me tired. What could they find in the whole of London prettier than Grace or Kathleen, or more perfect or cultivated in every way! But they *didn't*, not a single one of them—the slackers!"

I wondered what it was the men hadn't done. Whatever it was I was entirely of Sophonisba's way of thinking—I always am—and said so.

"Poor Gladys next—for, of course, I don't count—she said only yesterday how she dreaded it, comin' home without bringin' it off, an' answerin' other girls' questions."

"What do you mean by saying you don't count, Sophonisba?" I demanded. Was it because she counted so much? Her mother dare not let her go lest she be snapped up at once by some duke or earl.

"How could I count in that way? Don't be silly!" she spoke almost sharply. "Of course the duchess will never make *me* go through *my* paces!"

I suppose it was selfish of me to be glad Sophonisba would not be "brought out" by the duchess, for I could only think of the heaps of men who would want to marry her; one of whom might possibly succeed, though he could never be worthy of her. But a man being unworthy doesn't prevent a nice girl marrying him—quite the contrary, I sometimes think.

"I don't think a fortnight's long enough, myself," went on Sophonisba in a worried sort of way. "It means such a *frightful* rush all the time, and never havin' any time off. I think the old skinflint might make it three weeks—but not her! She says, 'Any girl worth her salt could get one in a fortnight,' and that she did it herself in five days, not countin' Sunday."

"Why didn't she count Sunday?" I could not help asking.

"Because she was a bishop's daughter," said Sophonisba, as if that quite settled the question.

"I must be gettin' back for tea," she said, though not very eagerly. "I hope they'll have left *somethin'*."

Since I dare not express what I should think of them if they didn't, I said nothing at all—till a bright idea struck me.

"Do you ever have picnics?" I asked eagerly.

"Oh, people give 'em now 'an then, but, of course, four are rather a lot as it is, an' there might be an eligible or some man stayin' somewhere at it, so it wouldn't do to waste him on me, an' then I never have any clothes——"

I bit my lip. It was all very well to act dragon, to hide the precious jewels from thieving fingers, but was it quite fair to Sophonisba? Surely young girls expected gaiety and admiration as their right? Again I decided that Mrs. Kearness was altogether over-doing her part, and an awful fear lest she might after all be keeping her for the duchess to show off and dazzle London with, clutched at my heart.

"I'm afraid I only meant a very humble picnic," I stammered, "you see this weather Dorothea very often gives Angus and me tea in the woods, and her cakes and scones are rather nice. And Angus tells such funny stories. I—I suppose you wouldn't come?"

"Then you suppose *wrong*," said Sophonisba to my delight. "Lead on, Macduff!"

It was the nicest picnic I had ever had. Angus told us two of his funniest stories, and got on famously with

Sophonisba, whom he seemed to know quite well. He would, however, call her "Miss Soapy."

She laughed very much, and so did I. Angus did not laugh. He says he considers it respectful to tell his best jokes to "gentry," but not to laugh at them, and so somehow—he finds it difficult, I fancy—manages not to.

Angus did not stay very long with us; he took his last bit of cake to another part of the garden, murmuring something about "green-fly," and I saw him smoking near the house. I was afraid he was being rude to Dorothea, for I thought I recognised her cap among the trees. Dorothea wears such pretty caps.

Sophonisba apologised for her appetite, which was unnecessary, for I was delighted she should find the cakes and scones good.

She said, "You see my sort need a lot of stokin' up, as luck will have it, an' I only had a light lunch."

It's all very well to start being careful at forty, but for young people it is a mistake to go in for these light lunches, and I said as much.

She answered me rather crossly, "Not lighter than I can *help*, of course, but there's seven of us, and it takes some workin' out."

I felt vaguely uneasy, and made her take the rest of the cake.

She also apologised for her frock and her shoes, adding with a laugh, "Of course, I did not know I was goin' out to a tea-party, or I'd have put my other dress on; it's less holey and hasn't shrunk so much in the wash."

Of course I had noticed, with great distress, the

holes in her otherwise pretty frock, and that her shoes were more uppers than unders. It made me feel very angry with Mrs. Kearness.

" I've mended an' mended, but it's past it, an' that's a fact," she said with a sigh. " Fortunately, Gladys is just done with her last year's. It's luck bein' the dump of the family, so that when they shrink I can wear 'em out——"

" But if they are *already* worn out ? " I said with an indignation I could not suppress.

I do not think she altogether liked my question. I suppose it *was* rather tactless.

" There's always a *little* more to be got out of them," she said stiffly. " 'T anyrate, there *has* to be, and that's all there is about it ! A new dress would be a waste on me ; and then the village children tear 'em and make sticky marks. But what worries me is this rage of Gladys for tight skirts. You know she's the tallest and slightest, and they look well on *her*, but now they've shrunk so that she can only *just* squeeze in, but owin' to her figure it doesn't matter. But fancy my carcass in 'em ; but it'll *have* to be done ! Then people will say I'm tryin' to be fashionable, and what a sight I look, though if it's no more than a sight, and not just immodest, that will be somethin' to be thankful for ! I can let out the waist—I always have to, of course—but waists aren't everything, are they ? "

I was glad Sophonisba did not think waists everything ; it was comforting hearing for a man who had none.

" It's the *skirts* bein' so narrow, an' *me* so wide ! " she groaned.

" Don't wear them," I urged. " Extremes of fashion

are ugly, aren't they? I feel sure you would like pretty, artistic-looking clothes?"

"Much good me likin' them would be!" she sighed. "No, I'll manage somehow, I suppose. I'll either get into 'em with decency, or I'll put a width in and pretend its fashionable to have some of the stuff washed out and the other fresh. Oh, how I envy men, it doesn't matter what *they* look like!"

"Do you really mean that?" I asked eagerly.

"Of course, I do!"

My spirits went up at a bound. Perhaps looks were not everything, after all.

That night I lay awake and worried because I greatly feared Sophonisba was lying awake and worrying too. I worried about myself as well as Sophonisba, though most about her, and most of all that she should have to wear an ugly, narrow skirt when she didn't want to. I could see she would have so loved pretty things of her own.

I think Angus found me thoughtful and a little absent next day, though I was less absent when he began to mention "Miss Soapy."

"I've heard a lot of her always, sir," he said, "and nothing ever to her discredit, which is wonderful, when you come to think of it——"

"To think of *what?*" I demanded with hauteur.

"Her sex!" said Angus, laconically.

CHAPTER XVIII

I SPEAK SERIOUSLY TO DOROTHEA

THINGS are going very badly indeed between Angus and Dorothea.

The other day, for instance, I heard a scuffle in the wood, and came suddenly on the pair of them looking red and ruffled, and Dorothea's cap all anyhow. It was a great shock to me, but I must acknowledge that Angus had the grace to look thoroughly ashamed of himself.

I can think of nothing more heinous than a man so forgetting himself as to use violence to a woman. Indeed, my blood boiled as I turned to the culprit, and sternly demanded what he had been doing to Dorothea.

He went redder than ever and hung his head. It was at least something to know him ashamed.

"Don't let it happen again!" I said.

He shuffled his feet, and seemed too taken aback to reply.

"Do you hear me?" I demanded sharply. "If you behave like this to Dorothea, I shall have to send you away!"

He looked startled then, and glanced swiftly at Dorothea, and she, I thought, looked a little startled too.

Then she tossed her head, so that her cap got more

crooked than ever, and looked as if she didn't care what became of Angus.

"Well, Angus?"

"Comes to this, sir," he returned doggedly, "it was her as started it. She pushed me, sir."

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Macdonald," said I—when really annoyed I always call him Macdonald——"to put the blame on a woman!"

"It's where it mostly belongs, sir," he said, in his obstinate way.

Angus' entire lack of chivalry is a great trouble to me. Indeed, he does not seem to understand the meaning of the word. He had the audacity to tell me that women started by making a muddle of things, and had gone on as a habit ever since.

"*Me* started it! I like that!" Dorothea tossed her head again, this time so violently that she almost lost her cap altogether.

I determined to be fair; the worst of criminals has a right to a hearing.

"*Did* you push him, Dorothea?" I asked her very gravely.

"*If* I did, sir," she replied promptly, "it weren't afore he needed it! The great Gahoo!"

Angus stalked away with his head in the air, and I pointed out to Dorothea how it was for the gentler sex to keep the peace.

"Well, I never, sir!" was all the observation she made.

"Angus is a truthful man," I went on, "and he said *you* pushed him."

"There's them as'll say *anything*," returned Dorothea, her cheeks very pink. "If I did it weren't afore he asked for it, sir! Him an' his imperence!"

I sighed. I could see she had taken a very violent dislike to Angus and all his ways, and that there was no softening her. How was I to keep peace between the enemies of my own household? Dorothea is little short of an angel, but I must own she can show rather a bitter spirit towards Angus. Of course, he is entirely to blame; at the same time, I don't think Dorothea makes it very easy for him to repent and amend his ways. She has a mocking expression when she as much as looks at him.

"Do you know the meaning of Dorothea?" I asked her solemnly, for it seemed to me here was a moral indeed! If she would only take the meaning to heart and act accordingly!

"The *meaning*, sir?" She was puzzled.

"Dorothea means 'the gift of God,'" I explained gravely.

"Well, I never did!" she replied and giggled. "To think of that now, it *do* seem rum, don't it!"

"Don't you see," I asked her, "how unsuitable it is for 'gifts of God' to push men who garden?"

She seemed confused, but she startled me by asking the meaning of Sophonisba.

I went most frightfully red.

You see, it was in looking for the meaning of Sophonisba in a quaint old book I have, that I came by chance across the meaning of Dorothea. Sophonisba hadn't been there at all, which had disappointed me very much. I had, therefore, been obliged to make up a meaning myself, and I could not but feel it was nicer and more suitable than any ever published.

But, of course, it was quite a private meaning, and I

could not tell it to Dorothea. It disconcerted me that she should have chanced upon it at all.

All I said was, and really in a *way* it was the truth, "I have no idea, Dorothea."

"That's a pity, sir, isn't it?" She looked at me with her innocent blue eyes, and I felt rather uncomfortable again. If Dorothea guessed that Sophonisba isn't the matter of complete indifference that I pretend! "And Angus, sir, what's the meanin' of that? Gahoo, maybe?"

I told her my book had not given the meaning of men's names, and asked her the meaning of "Gahoo" itself.

"Why, it just *means* Gahoo, sir," she replied, "and suits Angus proper!"

I had to leave it at that.

Before going into the house I asked her, as ruler of my affairs, to raise my housekeeper's salary. "She gives me entire satisfaction," I said.

"She's a well-meaning young female enough," said Dorothea, considering the subject, "and I'll see what I can do, sir."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SQUIRE CONDESCENDS

TO-DAY when the squire came and "hawed" at me over my gate, he had a book in his hand.

I have mentioned, I think, that Pollyt "haws" at all those whom, for some reason or other, he considers his inferiors—that is to say, everybody in Hill Land. I have heard that he omits this prefix when conversing in London with those he is pleased to consider his equals—in other words, the truly great.

He makes me very conscious that I have nerves, and he gets on them rather badly. If I had the wit I should be very rude to Pollyt, but I have never been able to say one smart or crushing thing in my life. Sometimes I have thought them, but that is the extent to which I have got. If I could do it just once I really think I could go down to my grave fairly satisfied, but I might as well hope for the sun, moon and stars—or for Sophonisba!

"Haw," he began, "killing time as usual, Delland! You gay bachelors without any responsibilities are the ones to be envied, by Jove!"

At the same time—as I knew quite well—he was not envying me in the least. He was merely looking down from his superior status at me. He loved his responsi-

bilities, they were the very breath of his nostrils, and spelt petty despotic power. He tyrannised over his tenants and employés till both hated the very sight of him. He was the little tin god, big in his own eyes, but rather absurd in the eyes of others. The very village children mocked him. His back was scarcely turned on their low curtsies and demure faces, before faces other than demure were directed at his unconscious majesty. Everybody suffered him because they had to, but few suffered him gladly. And I'm afraid my feeling towards him amounted to violent distaste.

"Haw . . . and how's the fair Dorothea?" He laughed as if at one of his own indecent jokes, and shook an arch fat finger at me. He looked so ridiculous that I felt myself blushing for him.

Unfortunately I am not content with blushing for myself, but perform the same painful duty for others, consequently I am more often red than pale.

My sudden access of colour seemed to amuse him. "A-ha!" he said, "A-*ha!*"

Among his many prerogatives is that of keeping the whole of the conversation to himself.

I usually continue digging, and wish to goodness he would go.

"At the same time," he observed suddenly, looking very solemn, "a man with a stake in the county owes it to himself to be careful. *Careful!* Haw—do you take me, Delland? I'm not blaming you, my dear fellow. I've been a gay young bachelor myself, once. Haw! Ha-ha! I must tell you a funny little episode relating to those times."

I had my back to him—I often have—and he clapped me on it and laughed loudly, "Haw, Delland, don't

be annoyed with my bluffness. I say what I think, you know, my dear chap."

I wanted to tell him that it was a pity he didn't think differently; but, as usual, I said nothing.

"Haw, Delland, you know we look upon you as an acquisition, we do, indeed! You mustn't make yourself too cheap, you know, and—er—leave out the conventionalities. In a place like this one goes in for the odour of sanctity and that sort of thing, rather a bore, of course, but it pays, my dear fellow, it pays! *I* ought to know. I speak to you as one man of the world to another!" He winked at me.

I realised what he was driving at. He reads the lessons in church regularly, and he wishes me to be present to hear him. The "odour of sanctity" includes standing majestically in his pew with even more majestic footmen in the background.

I should like to go to church for various reasons, one of them because Sophonisba would be there, and I could steal unnoticed glances in her direction all the time. But I cannot find courage to face the ordeal. The congregation is almost entirely a female one, and I have heard that it is a point of etiquette to stare fixedly at any strange man and try not to giggle at him. The experience would simply kill me.

"Haw, no offence meant and none taken, I trust?"

I went on with my work.

To my annoyance he began speaking of Mrs. Kearness, and not in a manner I approved of. It annoyed me very much, for Mrs. Kearness was Sophonisba's mother, and I hadn't the wit to defend her as I wished.

"A pushing and determined woman, Delland, haw!" he said. "Most persevering! *You* know what

I mean? I hear you see quite a lot of her? She never loses much time."

The spadeful of earth I threw up damaged the brightness of his boots. He moved back with a glance of annoyance I pretended not to see.

"And then her four daughters, giving themselves the airs of professional beauties, most laughable! Unpolished country bumpkins!"

I said I had found the four Miss Kearnesses extremely polished and very pretty.

He waved his hand as if dismissing their claims to polish and beauty. "Absurd!" he cried. "In a place like this, tolerable perhaps, but in the world! my dear Delland! a man wants something socially all right, some one to do him credit, brains and beauty and a certain status. The four Miss Kearnesses are all very well in their way, and will no doubt finally get husbands suitable to their position in life—though, of course, Soapy is different."

Even Pollyt, rough crude brute as he was, could see the difference of Sophonisba!

Suddenly he held out the book he was holding to me. "I thought you might like to read this," he said. "I can recommend it."

I determined not to read anything that the squire found pleasure in. It must be very bad indeed.

"It's a novel," he said carelessly.

"I never read novels," I returned, making no movement to take the book. I have, indeed, never read a novel in my life.

"Neither do I," said he scornfully, "but this is not an ordinary novel; it is exceptionally good. My niece wrote it."

I stared at him with amazement. That his niece should write a book at all seemed very astonishing to me, but that it should be a good one—if it was—even more amazing !

" It has been a great success, haw !—ten editions."

" Really ! "

" Haw, yes ! A most remarkable girl, Marcia, most remarkable indeed ! You will be charmed, I feel sure ; a clever fellow like you will be able to appreciate it. If Marcia happens to come down for a rest—I insist on her doing so every now and then—you shall be one of those privileged to meet her, you shall, indeed, my dear fellow ! A most brilliant and fascinating girl, I assure you ; and with the world at her feet, the world at her feet ! "

I could see Pollyt was immensely proud of this book—or of its success—but the thought of meeting any relative of his appalled me, and above all, one brilliant and fascinating, with " the world at her feet."

" Thank you," I said blankly.

" Haw, not at all, Delland," he replied graciously. " Poor Marcia is rather victimised among the natives here, no intellectual meeting ground possible, you know ; you will be a veritable acquisition. She is a most unusual girl, I assure you, most unusual, and not at all spoilt with her success."

" I feel sure she's unusual," I agreed, unhappily. She must be, I knew, for Pollyt to think so much of her. His ideas on the subject of women are neither refined, truthful, nor creditable.

The thought of meeting her, however, terrified me exceedingly, and I hoped she would not happen to come down for ever so long.

That night I read my first novel—and it proved a revelation to me! It was wholly delightful, most brilliant, most charming, and only altogether an unusual person could have written it. It had an odd effect on me, for it caused me to lose all fear of the squire's niece, and instead to have a great longing to meet her. There was nothing of hard brilliance about the book; it was kindly, tolerant, whimsical. I could not feel afraid of a writer like that. She would understand too well. She would not mock my lack of cleverness; rather would she have mercy upon my limitations, and she had put into beautiful language so many of my own thoughts. I had been afraid they were rather absurd, but Miss Pollyt did not make them seem in the least absurd. It was a great art, and it seemed to me she should be an exceptionally happy and fortunate woman.

It was odd that she should come to stay with the squire a few days later, odd, but very exciting, I thought. The fashionable wife sent me a very affable invitation to dinner, and rather to my own amazement, I found myself writing a grateful acceptance.

Since I have known Sophonisba I have desired to know other women even more; and I do not think I am as shy as I used to be.

At the same time the evening clothes, bought when I was much younger and never replaced, were neither comfortable nor becoming, and I was thankful Sophonisba would not see me with such strained buttons. I decided to replace them with the best that money could procure before dining anywhere again.

The squire was most affable, even the fashionable wife gave me a gracious welcome, and Miss Pollyt

was all that her uncle had said—and handsome as well as charming. To my amazement I found myself talking to her quite easily, and I spent a most enjoyable evening, and went away with the hope I should see much more of Miss Pollyt. It would be a great joy and a great privilege, I think, to have such a woman for a friend. It was not an honour I had much hope of, for I knew she must have her own circle of brilliant and interesting friends, and in me she could, alas, find nothing to make my friendship worth while. Her tact was exquisite, for I quite forgot how shy and dull and middle-aged I was, when talking to her. I hope I did not bore her, for I had never talked so much to anybody in my life. We seemed to have so much in common, though I was what I was, and she such a brilliant and interesting woman.

In appearance she was tall, and yet not that type of tallness that calls for comment or looks remarkable: she merely looked a perfect and very graceful height. Her figure was slender, and yet round, and her eyes were even bluer than Dorothea's. Her blue eyes with her black hair and warm russet skin made a fascinating combination, and I think, after Sophonisba, she is the loveliest woman I have ever seen. She wears the most exquisite clothes and shoes and shiny stockings. It is all very simple, and yet somehow just right, and does not look at all expensive. The fashionable wife looked almost tawdry beside her, and a little over-dressed.

I wish Sophonisba could have frocks like that!

Often now I am obliged to notice little things about Sophonisba's clothes that upset me very much. For instance, that the colour has run in streaks, or that some

bits hang down longer than others, or that there are holes.

I have a good mind to suggest to Sophonisba that she writes one of those sort of books that make money. If Miss Pollyt has done it, why not Sophonisba, who, I feel sure, is the very cleverest girl there ever was. It must be quite a pleasant way of making money I should think, and I can only suppose it has never occurred to Sophonisba or she would have done it already, and be wearing clothes like Miss Pollyt's.

For a long time the squire's admiration of *Beggars Twain* puzzled me very much, for I should have said it was the very last sort of book he *would* have admired, but I have come to the conclusion that what he admires is not the book at all, but its undoubted success, and the reflected glory it has brought him.

CHAPTER XX

THE SQUIRE'S NIECE

THE other day as I was gardening, the squire and his niece came down the road. I know I was delighted to see the latter, and I think my face showed it. She smiled at me very kindly, and the sun resting on her hair picked out flickering little gold points in the black.

For a few minutes, Pollyt, who was in his most affable mood, had all the conversation to himself, but the stream dried up much quicker than usual. Then he pulled out his watch with the plop with which the watches of the stout and pompous *do* emerge.

"Haw! Dear me!" he exclaimed. "I promised to see Farmer Ackers about his pigsties, and he must be waiting for me! What am I to do with you, Marcia?"

He looked at me, and Miss Pollyt seemed not to hear the question.

"It's such a rough, dirty place, not fit for you, my dear; still I leave you in good hands, haw, Delland? I won't be long; I'll just skip across and be done with it."

Without more ado he "skipped," and with remarkable agility considering!

Miss Pollyt looked after him with a little twinkle in

her eyes, and then at me. "If you had an uncle?" she began laughing.

"He's dead," I said. I put the spade down, and leaned on the part of the gate Miss Pollyt was not using. I was delighted to have the chance of talking to her; indeed—after Sophonisba—I would rather have talked to Miss Pollyt than anybody in the world.

"But if he *wasn't* dead—if he was the very *un*deadest uncle that ever existed, and he was awfully kind, and you were really fond of each other, but usually at cross purposes, what then?"

I shook my head, the problem was beyond me.

"If you were the only two of the old stock left, and both thought an awful lot of the ties of kinship and that sort of thing, and you were awfully poor, and loved the country, and the change and rest, and yet when you took advantage of it all, you were continually finding yourself put in a false position? What would you do about *that,* Mr. Delland?"

"I think it would depend on the sort of false position," I said at length.

"If it was the most painful of any sort for a woman with any pride and self-respect . . . something hateful, and yet quite inexplicable . . ."

I looked at her sympathetically, for it seemed to me I had guessed her difficulty. Somewhere in the county was a man her uncle wished her to accept, and since, apparently, she had no intention of doing anything of the sort, coming down gave the unfortunate wretch false hopes, and made the whole position very difficult for Miss Pollyt.

"I see what you mean," I returned, not looking at her. "I—I think he ought to understand——"

Her cheeks deepened in hue, and she looked on the ground, and seemed rather taken aback. "You think he does?" she said in almost a whisper.

"I feel sure of it," I said. The man must be dull indeed if he failed to understand. It was pretty obvious, I thought, that Miss Pollyt had refused him at least once.

"Then I shall enjoy myself, and not bother," she exclaimed thankfully. "It would have been trying to have to return to my hot little flat at this time of the year; never have I seen the country look so wonderful, even the songs of the birds seem fuller and richer!"

Her eyes were sparkling as she spoke, her cheeks flushed. She made a very beautiful picture. I'm afraid I stared more than was polite.

"My flat is just wee," she went on, resting her chin on her clasped hands, "literally no room to swing a cat, and I muddle along anyhow there most of the year. I can't afford to keep a servant, I spend a lot going about, and am rather extravagant with clothes——" She laughed, showing such pretty teeth.

"Oh, I'm sure you're not," I said warmly. "Your things are always so awfully simple and economical-looking."

She laughed again, and then said "Doucet," as if that explained everything, but as I did not know who or what Doucet was, it did not enlighten me in the least. Was it the name of some inexpensive material? I have, of course, seen elegantly dressed women in the streets of big towns, but till I met Miss Pollyt, I had never met any one on whom clothes seemed just to grow—and to grow so very simply and perfectly.

"But I thought popular writers made lots of money," I said puzzled.

"I am not as popular as that, and never will be," she returned. "You know you need to be frightfully good, or frightfully bad, to get the huge public, and I am neither."

I felt uneasy about Sophonisba; it was not that I doubted she could be frightfully good, but that I was afraid that to be frightfully bad might be more paying still. I asked Miss Pollyt the sort of book she considered would pay best on the whole.

For the first time her lovely mouth looked cynical, as she smiled, and returned, "The sort that makes its reader feel intelligent without imposing upon him the necessity of being so."

I digested this in silence; it seemed to require some digestion.

Her face grew weary. "It's three steps backwards to one forwards," she said, "and often I am very, very sick of it, and yet I don't know that I could bear to give it up. It has come to mean a great deal to me, it has had to take the place of almost everything else, and that means much. And yet there are certain circumstances under which I could lay it down thankfully enough, and just *live* instead of merely writing of life."

"What circumstances?" I asked eagerly.

Her lovely warm colour rose again, and she laughed in rather an embarrassed fashion. "You can't put all of yourself into two channels," she said at length. "At present my Moloch claims all, but there might be other claims . . ." Her eyes grew dreamy.

"Yes," I sighed, "I see what you mean, but I do

not see how you are ever to find anybody good enough for you, Miss Pollyt, or worthy the sacrifice."

"What nonsense," she exclaimed, stooping to adjust the lace of her shoe, "and why talk of sacrifice! Do you believe in—in love, Mr. Delland? So few people do now, I think; they merely believe in motor-cars and the power of gold."

"I believe in it none the less that for me . . . that I do not expect it," I returned.

"Why should you not expect it? I think you have every right to it, Mr. Delland, and I feel sure that some day it will be yours. But how absurd and how personal we are, aren't we? Only I was trying to explain that with me my writing was by no means all, and that if need-be, I could give it up. You see it is just talent, cleverness, if you will, but it isn't genius, Mr. Delland. One does not talk of giving up genius, because that is an impossible thing to do, and genius has you, and holds you, to the end. Only if I . . . suppose things went wrong, there would be my work left, and what the world calls a 'good marriage.' I should not shut myself up and grieve; I would just get what was left out of life; don't you think that is the best philosophy?"

"I don't know," I stammered, "it's letting go of the ideal, isn't it?"

"I believe in letting go," she said with a sigh, "when the ideal starts struggling in your grasp. I am lucky to have what talent I have; otherwise it would have meant some uncongenial drudgery, with the workhouse unpleasantly near!"

She laughed as if the workhouse was the best joke in the world. Her laugh is not as beautiful as

Sophonisba's; still it is very beautiful, though there is something a little sad about it.

"But your uncle is a rich man?" I gasped.

"Oh, no, it is his wife who is rich," she returned. "Poor uncle would hardly be able to keep *himself* out of the workhouse but for her—let alone me. I could not be a burden on another while I had health and strength to do *something!*"

"I cannot bear to think of women working for their living," I said restlessly. "It—the idea, upsets me. If I had my way no woman should work for her living unless she wished to as an occupation. She should be queen of a kingdom, with a Dorothea to make everything smooth for her, and have a good time, and wear lovely clothes."

"You'd make us all into lotus-eaters!"

"I'd save you from being labourers when you should be players, and I'd have all the unpleasant husbands painlessly destroyed, and another batch for you to pick something better," I said.

Miss Pollyt clapped her hands, and her eyes danced. "How delightful! Oh, Mr. Delland, why were you not consulted in the making of the world! How happy we should all be!"

"It does seem a pity," I agreed, laughing. "You should have a house in Park Lane to start with, and all the public for your novels——"

"And heaps and heaps of husbands?" she asked demurely. "Only to choose from," she added, "and a mere one at a time! But if he was not quite satisfactory you wouldn't let him last too long, would you?"

"Not a minute longer than you wished," I assured her.

" And I could depend on you that in this large batch for me to choose from, *the* one would not be missing ? You see, if you gave me ninety-nine, and left out the hundredth, which was the one who really counted, it wouldn't profit me much after all, would it ? "

" The hundredth would be there first," I promised. " You could be absolutely certain on that point, Miss Pollyt."

" Then I should hardly need the ninety and nine, should I ? " she asked merrily. " They would just be encumbrances. You need only see that I get them in case the hundredth gets snapped up elsewhere. Then, of course, I should get a substitute at once, if only to show it did not matter."

But I felt that to Miss Pollyt it would matter very exceedingly, and was glad to think that for such as her there would be always the one too many, and never the one too few.

" Have you nobody but your uncle ? " I asked her. It sounded lonely, I thought.

" Not a living soul. He was the eldest brother, and inherited everything, an empty honour unfortunately ; my father got nothing at all, and died shortly after his marriage. My mother died when I was five, and uncle —though only a young man himself—simply did everything he could for me. Seeing him as you do, you could not realise how kind and generous he can be. He married a very rich woman, and though it was for the old place and himself, yet I know it was a little for me too. He thought I would live with them, marry quickly from their house and that sort of thing. He was really hurt, when on the strength of short stories accepted readily enough, I went out into the world on

my own account, and is hoping I will fulfil the original programme. When his manœuvres aren't too obvious to the other person they are rather amusing, and I've had many a laugh to myself over them. Of course sometimes it is a little humiliating, but when people understand . . ."

She looked at me with her lovely kind eyes.

"I think it's rather funny," I said. I hoped very much I might see some of the squire's manœuvres. I wondered who the young man was, and where he came from.

As I looked at Miss Pollyt it suddenly occurred to me that I had roses the exact shade of her gown. I handed her a bunch, and she put them in her belt, where they looked lovely, I thought. I cannot describe her dress save it was just the thing for a June day, and suited her eyes and her wonderful warm skin. I wish Sophonisba could have shoes like Miss Pollyt and stockings also—the shiny kind—to match her gown.

I sighed, for things seemed hardly fair to Sophonisba, and who was there in the wide world to mend them? Of course I knew the prince would come some day, but one hears of princes that linger on the way, and sometimes it seemed to me that the special prince for Sophonisba was a laggard.

I forgot Miss Pollyt till I found her lovely blue eyes looking at me ever so gravely. I had an idea she read my thoughts, and her words went to prove it.

"It's a poor heart that never rejoices," she said lightly, "and faint heart that never——" She broke off with a laugh. "What an age uncle is!"

"I am boring you?" I said unhappily.

"Don't be absurd. I have enjoyed our conversation

immensely. Why, we seem to have everything in common ! "

I shook my head. " You are a brilliant woman of the world, a talented writer, one of the clever people. I am only a dull old fogy who has done nothing with his life—and I'm forty ! "

I groaned as I made the hateful confession, and added in self-defence, " though I was only thirty-nine yesterday—quite a lad ! "

But Miss Pollyt only laughed. " How modest you are ! Has it not struck you that you might have done more and thought less ? You are one of the thinkers, Mr. Delland, and you cannot disguise the fact from me or throw me off the scent ; and then I hear you are a great classical scholar."

" But classics interest me, that's no credit." Satan scampered up to me as I spoke, and at once made friends with Miss Pollyt. She loved all animals, and had a wonderful way with them. " And is that your gardener ? " she asked, pointing to the distant back of Angus. " How clever of him to look disapproving from this distance ! "

" Why should he look disapproving, and at what ? " I asked in amazement.

" I don't know, but he *does*. Perhaps he's Scotch."

" How did you guess that ? " I gasped.

" Very clever, wasn't it ? But you see I caught a glimpse of his face, and he had the high Scotch cheek-bones, and very cautious eyes, and I thought some one called him ' Angus.' So it is not all literary genius, but partly logical deduction, you know."

" I think it's very wonderful," I said, " for he *is* Scotch, and—rather cautious in some ways."

"In the matter of women, for instance? That is why he disapproves of me."

"Oh, not even Angus could disapprove of you!" I gasped. "Impossible!"

"No, I have not found favour in his sight, odd as it is. His Scotch caution makes him ask questions. What am I up to? Am I to be trusted? Shall I steal the spade or some other garden implement? If he had been Irish, he would have had his eyes to me all the time because I am a woman, and therefore interesting, and a fairly presentable one——"

"*Fairly!*" I echoed indignantly.

"Well, pretty fairly!" she laughed.

"If a Scotchman maintains a disapproving back, and an Irishman an approving face, what does an Englishman do?" I enquired.

"A little back, and a little face, in turns," she retorted. "He is not as disapproving as the Scotchman, nor as approving and interested as the Irishman. I am neither a possible Jezebel, nor a possible miracle, I am merely a nice-looking woman very well turned out."

She made me a mocking curtsey.

"I deny it," I said with heat. "No Irishman could be more appreciative of beauty than I."

"I meant the average Englishman——"

"But surely I am——"

"Nothing of the sort."

"Then what on earth——" I began bewildered.

"You will not be offended?"

"Of course not."

"Then I should place you among the dreamers and thinkers; the chivalrous and the philosophers."

"You flatter me," I said a little bitterly. "I am nothing but a fool! Pansy has said so."

"And who is Pansy?" she asked quickly.

I explained.

Her lips tightened. "I don't think sisters-in-law count," she said; "at least *I* should not count them, and I hope you won't either, Mr. Delland. But about your Scotchman," she seemed anxious to change the subject. "He is a good worker, I suppose?"

I told her all that Angus was.

"It's wonderful the faculty the Scotch have for getting on. Now, you are Irish, Mr. Delland. Your eyes are Irish grey."

"Oh, are they?" I said astonished. "Do you know, I had never even noticed that."

"If you had been a woman you'd have noticed it," she said.

"I suppose so, they are so much more observant. What do you think would be the most useful 'gift' to go through life with?"

"I ought to say love for one's fellows and a brave heart, but I am more inclined to say a thick skin or a vivid sense of humour. Of course stupidity is nice thick armour too. The things you must not possess are deep feelings and a passionate heart."

She spoke a little bitterly, I thought.

In the far distance I caught sight of Mr. Kearness' hat vanishing round the corner.

"Do you like clergymen?" I asked.

"From a woman's point of view I consider clergymen know too little about us, and doctors too much, to make friendship with either desirable. I cannot quite get

into focus with the point of view of either. Perhaps because I do not want to."

"Suppose you take the average clergyman——" I began.

She raised protesting hands, "Heaven forbid!" she exclaimed, laughing.

I laughed too.

"Have you put one among the ninety-nine; no, it's a hundred you promised, isn't it? Oh, Mr. Delland, how quite too bad of you!"

"I assure you I included neither a clergyman nor doctor," I said, "though for the latter I have the greatest admiration; indeed a hard-working, conscientious doctor takes first place with me, but——"

"They certainly don't sound exciting to marry," she concluded. "How can they, poor dear things? They have seen such an ugly side of human nature half the time, and they can't have a single illusion left—certainly not about women! Now I should like my husband to have an illusion or two—if only to start with!"

"Your husband would not need to have illusions, the reality would be enough," I said warmly. Just then Sophonisba appeared round one corner, and the squire round the other. Both must have heard our conversation.

The squire, after an affable word or so, took his niece home, and Sophonisba was passing on her way without noticing me, when I ran in front of her and begged her to tell me what I had done to offend her, for it seemed to me she was offended about something.

CHAPTER XXI

SOPHONISBA IS STRANGE

SHE said I hadn't offended her—"the idea! It was like a man to think that sort of thing! Talk about women being vain!"—but she spoke crossly, and made as if to pass on.

"But you're not stopping," I stammered, "and you always stop!"

"Thanks for remindin' me," she said, more crossly than ever. "It seems to me some people have all the luck, beauty *and* brains."

"They deserve it!" I said warmly. Sophonisba's luck might place her farther from me than ever, but I was not going to grudge it her.

"I dare say," she said shortly, "but that doesn't make it any better for the others."

It is like Sophonisba to be always thinking of others.

"The others don't count," I said recklessly, for really they didn't—with me. I was only very sorry for them.

"Thanks! I'm off!" She turned to go.

"Then you *are* offended! Oh, Sophonisba, what *have* I done?"

"I suppose even *I* need feedin' in a fashion, though anythin' will do, of course!" She spoke with a sort of

snort, not a snort like Pansy's, but a becoming sort of snort.

"It's not time yet," I replied, consulting my watch.

"It's time if I say it is; 'tanyrate clever people like talkin' to clever people, and don't want to be bored."

She got out her handkerchief and blew her nose several times. Her lovely eyes were a little watery.

"Have you got a cold, Sophonisba?" I asked anxiously. "I have some jujubes, but they are rather beastly, and you might prefer the cold."

"I don't want your silly old jujubes—or your roses either," she returned, more crossly than ever. "Let her have 'em, let her have everythin' she hasn't got *already!* She won't notice 'em in the crowd or value 'em, but that doesn't matter, does it? You and your poisonous old jujubes!" She gave a sort of strangled snort.

"Let who have what?" I asked. I was utterly at sea; never had I seen Sophonisba in such a strange mood!

Instead of answering, she changed the subject. "What do you think of Miss Pollyt?" she asked.

"Miss Pollyt?" I repeated surprised. I had forgotten all about her for the time being. "Oh, she's charming, of course."

"Of course! You dined there last night, didn't you, and had a long talk this morning. You will be getting quite friends."

"I hope so," I said, "though it's a lot to ask, isn't it? Don't you like her?"

She hadn't spoken as if she did.

"I! Oh, she would hardly waste her time on a

girl like me, I doubt whether she's conscious of my existence ! "

" But you must have ever so much in common ! " I exclaimed puzzled.

Sophonisba only stared as if she thought I was mad.

" *Do* sit on the gate ? " I begged her. The gate has become specially endeared to me through Sophonisba sitting on it.

She hesitated, then she took her usual seat, and began to swing her feet backwards and forwards.

I could not help noticing that she still had the same shabby old shoes, and that there were no less than three holes in her stockings, which looked very thick and rough for such a hot day. I felt furious with Mrs. Kearness. If she cannot buy Sophonisba the shiny kind—though she ought to make some sacrifice to do so—surely the least she can do is to mend the ones she does wear ! It can't be very nice for a refined, noble-minded girl like Sophonisba, to have to go about with holes in her stockings. I could hardly suppress my indignation on her behalf.

What a laggard knight was Sophonisba's ! Surely the thought of holes in her stockings should have made him put spurs to his steed, and come riding into the valley without further delay ! Surely if he knew the joys that awaited him—for he would be able to totally replenish Sophonisba's wardrobe, and go into hat shops with her while she tried them all on, and the assistants gaped with admiration and thought what a joy it was to serve her !

Sophonisba followed my eyes and stuck out her feet with a sigh.

" Yes, awful, ain't they ? "

"You can't help it; it's not your fault," I said warmly.

"People don't think of it like that. If you have a hump, you've got to accept the blame as if you ordered it specially. Mine are O.S. you know!"

"O.S.?" I repeated bewildered.

"Yes, outers; out sizes. Useful sort of hoofs," she laughed in a funny way. "I suppose you noticed Miss Pollyt's, she mostly sees to it that people *do?* She's inches taller than me, but hers are only threes; mine are chiefly sevens or eights."

"It's a pity for a girl to be out of proportion," I said, for if Miss Pollyt, taller than Sophonisba by so much, yet took less than half her size in shoes, she was obviously very much out of proportion.

"It's worse than a pity," said Sophonisba crossly, "it's dashed humiliating! Makes you look such an ass, don't you know! Of course you noticed her rippin' shoes an' stockin's."

"I liked her shiny stockings," I returned. "Why don't *you* wear the shiny kind, Sophonisba?"

"Ask me another!" she exclaimed impatiently. "*Should* I want to call attention to mine? What about paying thirty bob for what *won't* wear, instead of one for what will—if only because they're rough and coarse! Me in shot silk stockings—what next? How old would you take Miss Pollyt to be?"

I hesitated. I wanted to make a correct guess if possible. My sister-in-law says I'm absurdly "quixotic" on the subject of women's ages, but I am nothing of the sort. I think there is a favourite age every woman would like to be thought, and I try to get as near to it as possible.

I guessed Miss Pollyt at twenty-five.

"She's nearly thirty," said Sophonisba with such satisfaction that I realised thirty is a very favourite age with some women.

"Really!" I exclaimed amazed, "I should never have supposed it! But of course thirty is just right for her, isn't it?"

"You mean *she* can afford it? Oh, I dare say; Grace is twenty-six, and we think that pretty serious, but, of course, she can afford it too; and, then, Miss Pollyt is clever as well. Now, *I've* no brains."

I gasped, "Oh, Sophonisba, how can you say such a thing," I exclaimed, "such an untrue thing!"

"Untrue indeed! What next. If I'd any brains at all I should go through life shoving the fact down everybody's throat—it would be an excuse for other things; but I haven't—none of us have. I suppose it must be father. *He* hasn't, you know."

I pointed out to her that her father belonged to one of the learned professions, and must have studied a lot and passed examinations.

"The learned *what*," she laughed. "Fancy the pater! 'Tanyrate it was only Scripture, an' things, and people can get a shove through on that surely, though the pater took some extra shovin', as I happen to know! It's hard luck, because there's mother now—touches the spot each time, got plenty, but has kept 'em! 'Course she's handed her looks on, which is something. I've always been the unlucky one, but never more unlucky than when I took after the poor pater."

"Took after your father," I gasped. "In heaven's name, in *what* way?"

" In every way, surely even you can see that ? "

" Well, I can't ? " I exclaimed hotly. " Don't be so utterly absurd, Sophonisba ! I don't like it."

" *You* don't like it ! Then what price *me !* "

Then I suddenly remembered the suggestion I had forgotten to offer. I asked her if she would rather not be poor.

" There may be men who don't mind bein' poor," she said scornfully, " but I've never heard of a woman built that way ; it would be against human nature. Look at the jolly things there are for women to buy."

" I've thought of a way for you to have lots of money——" I began eagerly.

" Oh ! " she jumped off the gate and made as if she was going to rush home.

" You've only got to——"

She interrupted me, her face a lovely pink. " I don't want anybody's pity," she said, in almost a savage tone. " If I can't have the other thing—and, of course, I know I can't, owin' to bein' so different—I'll go without, and if you say another word, I'll never speak to you again—so there ! "

" But, good gracious," I gasped. " What is there insulting in the suggestion that you should write books that make money like Miss Pollyt ? "

She stared at me, and her face grew pinker than ever. " So that was your remedy ? " Her voice did not sound enthusiastic.

" Yes, the kind that pay. They have got to be intelligent, or rather to make the reader think himself so, but they mustn't be too much so, or people won't buy them."

" And who is goin' to supply the intelligence, the readers or me ? " she asked in a dry sort of way.

" Both, I suppose."

" I'm afraid the reader would have to do it all," she said, laughing, " and you have owned yourself they don't like doing it. Why, I can't write a letter without makin' myself look ridiculous; you should *see* my writin' an' spellin', it's enough to make a cat laugh ! "

" No genius can spell," I said boldly, for I seemed to have heard something of the sort stated very positively, " they put that right for you when they publish your masterpiece ; they are very glad to have the privilege of doing it when you are a genius——"

" And when you're *not*——"

" That can't apply to you. Why, look what an idiot I am, and I can spell everything ! "

" Who said you were an idiot ? " she asked sharply.

" Pansy says I'm a fool, and Pansy always knows," I returned gloomily.

" Pansy is a cat then, and a liar too ! " said Sophonisba, quite furiously, " 'Tanyrate it's better to be too much of a fool than not a fool at all ! "

I'm afraid the philosophy of Sophonisba is too deep for me. I could not see it.

" As for bein' always right, nobody, not even Miss Pollyt, is always right."

" But Pansy is," I groaned.

" Then she ought to have more tact," said Sophonisba, " and she can't be so clever after all. A clever woman would let other people be right now and then, and get liked instead of just respected—I suppose she's just respected ? "

"Well—er—yes, mostly," I had to own. "Of course James likes her—he's her husband, you know."

"He must be a funny sort of husband!" said Sophonisba, with a sniff. "Beg pardon, forgot he's your brother—just like me!"

"Oh, not at all," I said. "And he isn't a funny sort of brother, you know, Sophonisba, and has heaps of friends, and is awfully popular. Most unlike me in every way!"

"It's easy for some to be popular," she returned. "It's not a thing that counts with me; it's just a sort of social gift——"

"Then you won't even try a book?" I asked.

"No. When the worst comes to the worst, I shall teach babies what I don't know myself, and get tuppence a year, and be dear at that! Really, if I'd any pluck I'd start at once, the stack of bills at home is too dreadful for words——!"

"Those are your father's concern, not yours," I said. "Just dismiss them from your mind, Sophonisba!"

How could there be anything but a stack of bills when seven grown-ups tried to live as gentlepeople on £200 a year? Mr. Kearness ought to see to it that Sophonisba was not worried. It was the least he could do with such a daughter. I do not think either of her parents really appreciated Sophonisba, or realised that she was not an ordinary beauty at all. For instance, they called her Soapy, and spoke of her quite as if she wasn't a miracle. Then there were the bills, and her sisters' out-grown garments, and the holes in her cheap stockings! It seemed to me that Mr. and Mrs. Kearness did not appreciate their great blessing as they

ought, and failed to cherish it beyond all other matters.

"But if he can't! The poor old boy is half off his head with worry, and no wonder! Of course his sermons give everybody the hump, and they grumble, but how can he help it, when probably the tradespeople he owes are there glarin' at him? He wants us to give up the butcher and live on turnips. He says they are quite nourishing, but Grace said she wasn't a beast of the field, and mother said it wouldn't pay to have the complexions all ruined and turnippy, so *that* was off. You should come to church, Mr. Delland; you should really, dare say you would quite enjoy it if you struck Mr. Steele's day; he can spout splendidly! There isn't much behind it, but there's plenty of spouting, and he can make you feel creepy and crawly—he's got the loveliest voice. You come—it will stop talk."

"What talk? About me, do you mean? But I can't be very interesting to talk about, surely?"

"People have to do somethin' in a place like this, and when people seem odd, people like to poke and pry and say things, you know, and pretend to have found out things! When they can't, they make it up, and it's wonderful what a lot of imagination there is in Hill Land! If you came to church they couldn't say you were an Atheist or Satanist, or had done a bunk from a monastery, and were really a Jesuit in disguise, and everybody knows what *they* are!"

"Good heavens!" I gasped. "I'll come to church to please you, Sophonisba."

She nailed me down to it there and then, "Next Sunday?"

I had not meant next, or the next after the next; my intention was all right, but it was vague. I had merely meant "some day," like the sinner who intends to give up his evil courses—usually when they no longer please!

I kept my promise to Sophonisba.

I think the ordeal of death would almost have been easier except for the thought that I was leaving Sophonisba behind.

On the following Sunday morning I told Angus I was going to church, explaining that I mustn't be late on *any* account.

He said he would give me the starting time. Then he disappeared.

I waited a long time at the gate for Angus, and the bells were ringing and people passing, but he did not return. Of course I did not hire him to work on Sunday, only to have a holiday; but I had asked him, as a friend, to see me in time for church. At last, just as the bells ceased ringing, he came tearing through the woods, his face very red, his hair rumpled, and his collar anyhow.

He said he'd been sitting under a tree just thinking, and he'd forgotten the time, and was horribly sorry, and would I forgive him, and to start at once?

I did both.

When, however, I found myself in a full church with the service just begun, I did not feel so forgiving to Angus. I turned to go back and give him a piece of my mind.

A fat little man, however, bumped into me from behind, and began to hustle me up to the aisle, while

everybody seemed to hold their breath and stare, and I saw the squire making signals.

I found myself in the Hall pew next to Miss Pollyt, whose kind, reassuring smile did much to help me. I gazed at her gratefully, and thought how lovely her hat was.

Then I looked eagerly round for Sophonisba, but she seemed not to see me, and didn't give me the welcome for which I had dared so much.

The squire's pew is so placed as to be the cynosure of all eyes, and I was raked by a most merciless battery. All the village girls stared, nudging each other, and whispering. Nobody seemed to pay much attention to the service, but every possible attention to me. It made me do the right things—such as standing up and kneeling down—at the wrong times. I hate being conspicuous. I got hotter and hotter, and everywhere stifled giggles reached my crimson ears. I wondered what I was going to do next.

Even Mr. Steele, a very excellent young man, I am told, paid more attention to me than to his duties. Mr. Kearness was at the other church in the hills. To add to my distress, 'Melia-Hann was there in the midst of the school children, with no mistress near enough to prevent her pointing out her "gent" to her interested friends. I saw her lips form the words "a perfect cure." She made signals to me when she thought nobody was looking.

When the squire read the first lesson, which was a terribly embarrassing one, and quite unsuited to a mixed audience, he read it deliberately at me, and gave me a sly wink when he returned to the pew. I wondered if the ordeal was ever going to end.

Not far away there was a pew of neat young women who never took their eyes off me all the time, and I recognised some of them as having been at the registry-office that awful day. It was odd to find out later that they were my own "staff."

Just as I had almost blushed myself to death, and the ordeal was nearly at an end, the plate came round.

I dropped it!

The money, of course, rolled everywhere, chiefly under ladies' skirts. It was something to lie down at the bottom of the pew where people could not see my shame and agony, and to pretend to be looking for the money.

Miss Pollyt dropped on her knees by my side and whispered to me not to mind, and pretended to hunt too.

"But I do mind," I whispered back, "I feel as if I shall die. I am going to stay like this for the rest of the time, and not go out till everybody has gone."

"Very well," she rose to her feet, and joined in the singing of the hymn.

When people stood up for Mr. Steele and the choir to pass out, I still remained where I was, though I felt every man as he passed, give a look over the pew trying to find me.

I flatter myself that none of them succeeded.

The squire kindly waited, too, till everybody had gone, and then he insisted that I should return to the Hall for luncheon and the rest of the day, if I had no previous engagement.

I accepted gladly. I can never see Sophonisba for a minute on Sundays.

I did, however, just catch a glimpse of her as with

Miss Pollyt I went across the field path, and I could see from her back view—which was all I could see—how angry and disgusted she was with me for the way I had behaved in church.

I shall not go to church again, not even for Sophonisba. All whose eyes I sought to avoid never looked at anybody else, while the one whose notice I craved, never looked at me! Let them think me a runaway monk. I have come to the stage when I simply don't *care* what people think!

CHAPTER XXII

ANGUS AND DOROTHEA ASTONISH ME

YESTERDAY a very dreadful thing happened. I discovered I had been deceived in Angus. He is very far indeed from being all I thought him.

I caught him kissing Dorothea!

I had been strolling through the woods so wrapt up in thoughts of Sophonisba, that I noticed nothing till I came right upon them.

I am glad to say my presence of mind did not desert me. I at once saved Dorothea from Angus.

"*Angus!* To kiss a woman against her will!" I gasped out.

"No woman is ever kissed against her will," said Angus in his dry way, "it ain't one of the things what happens, sir, and if you knew wimmin better you'd know that without tellin'. Did Dorothea *say* it was against her will?"

Dorothea just glared without answering. I could see the poor girl was dreadfully upset at the outrage, and no wonder!

"You left her no time or breath to say anything," I said sternly, "and you must know that it is *always* against a woman's will, isn't it, Dorothea?"

Dorothea hung her head. "Usually, sir," she

stammered, "but there's folks as get took by surprise——"

"I know," I said, "it is very abominable indeed! I am more shocked and surprised than I can say!"

Angus scratched his head and expectorated, both very unpleasant habits which—if it wasn't too personal—I should like to ask him to discontinue. But I have been told that a man will readily accept abuse on the matter of his morals or his relations, before he will tolerate a word against his habits.

Dorothea ran away into the house, and I turned to Angus, wishing I knew the right thing to say. He did not look half as ashamed as he ought to have done.

"A modest girl like Dorothea! How you must have outraged her feelings," I said reproachfully.

"Wimmen ain't as modest as you look for, sir," said Angus, departing unashamed.

It was painful to have to recur to the subject with Dorothea, but I felt it my duty. I asked her if she would like me to dismiss Angus.

She dropped the tray she was carrying, and when she had picked it up, said she thought it might be overlooked.

"If you feel you can overlook it?" I said, "it is very kind of you, Dorothea. Of course a first offence . . ."

She looked at me with a very red face. I think the whole subject embarrassed her almost as much as it did me—to whom it was excessively painful.

"I may have pushed him a bit, aggravatin' creature!" she mumbled.

"A woman must defend herself as best she can till

assistance comes," I replied. "I'm glad I came, Dorothea!"

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir."

"I shall make it my object to protect you," I went on.

"Thank you, sir." She spoke in a very faint voice.

"You had better not go into the woods again, or too far from the house. That he should revenge himself for his dislike like that! I am disgusted with Angus."

"There's worse, sir," she said quickly, "although I dislike him the same, the imperent Gahoo!"

"You can trust me, Dorothea. He shall never assault you again."

She gave a gasp, and thanked me. The poor girl was dreadfully upset by all that she had gone through.

I took care never to let Angus out of my sight when he was on the premises, and advised Dorothea never to go outside the gates when he might be lurking in the village. I don't think, however, that the lack of exercise and fresh air suited her. She got rather pale and tired-looking, and seemed to lose her spirits.

Angus became leaner and drier of manner than ever. I got so clever at keeping an eye on him, and seeing to it that Dorothea and he could never possibly come across each other, that he grew positively sullen and revengeful, and tried to pay me out. He told me none of his funny stories, and let me miss trains. More than once he showed traces of a fierce temper when I had skilfully outflanked some manœuvre of his and he found it impossible to escape my vigilance.

The worst of it was, it gave me less time for Sophonisba—not that she had come near the gate lately—and prevented me from accepting all the squire's invitations. They seemed to expect me to spend the greater

part of the day with them—and to dine there every night.

The squire had at once noticed my new clothes. "Haw, you sly dog, Delland you," he dug me in the ribs while he spoke. "We all know the signs, I think, been young myself once! Ha-ha!"

I went most frightfully red.

"Haw! Well, never mind, my dear boy, it's only my chaff!"

The more I see of Pollyt, the more I dislike him; but for the charm of Miss Pollyt's society I should try not to see him at all, but she makes up for everything; and I seem to get to know her better each time. She is staying on, I am glad to say. She has explained why this is so on several occasions, but I am not quite sure if it is something to do with her flat, or some business matter.

I do not meet Mrs. Kearness very often now, and I imagine something must be wrong at the vicarage—she looks so worried! She hardly has time for a word, and doesn't seem so friendly.

The other day she observed in the most frigid tones, "I suppose I must not ask you to the vicarage as you are so *very* much occupied at present?"

"Yes, I seem to have every minute filled up," I said a little reluctantly, for I was getting very tired of acting watchdog to Angus, and poor Dorothea was so fearful lest I should relax my vigilance, that her cooking became far less perfect than usual, and things in the house did not seem quite the same.

I knew it was no good my going to the vicarage, it's the last place in the world to see Sophonisba. I had gone once, been formally introduced to Sophonisba,

which made me feel a low, deceitful liar, and then she had at once departed, and I had seen no more of her.

"I might have *known* it!" said Mrs. Kearness in a tired voice. "I had no idea you were such a Society man! What with Miss Pollyt and Mrs. Gellet you must have your time very much occupied indeed! And *both* so charming!"

"Yes, aren't they?" I said pleased.

"And Mrs. Gellet is a widow," she said, as if that was rather an advantage for Mrs. Gellet than otherwise.

"I know," I said gravely. "It is very sad, is it not, Mrs. Kearness?"

"Doubtless there are compensations, Mr. Delland."

"One can hope so," I assented, "and so young, so brave!"

"Oh very! She can't be much older than I, when all's said and done." Then she said good-day and turned to go.

I was astonished to hear that Mrs. Gellet was far from being as young as I thought. I could only suppose Mrs. Kearness had made a mistake. Perhaps she did not know, as I had the privilege of doing, that Mrs. Gellet had been married as "a mere child."

Mrs. Gellet is a young widow with very bright hair who lives in a cottage in the village. Her husband was killed in the Boer War, and she lives on a small pension, but is ever so brave and bright about it. It appears that Major Gellet—though a nice enough fellow—scarcely understood her rare and sensitive nature, and really made her rather unhappy. She is a charming woman in every way, and it is hard that her life should be over so soon. She has been very kind about my garden, and has shown me where to put things, and

how to treat them. She and the fashionable wife were at one time very friendly, but I believe Mrs. Gellet has had to give up the friendship ; she said the fashionable wife was a trifle too frivolous for one who had suffered so much from life's trials. Though she tries to hide the fact, one cannot but see how very lonely her life must be.

" I came here without a friend in the world," I said, " and I have found ever so many ! I am indeed fortunate. It is more than kind that people should put up with such a dull old fogy, indeed I can hardly understand it."

" In this world," she said, passing on with a jerk of her head, " there's method in everybody's madness if you analyse it."

Before I could ask her meaning she had gone.

Last night after dinner a most extraordinary thing happened. I was sitting in the library thinking—needless to say !—of Sophonisba, when a timid sort of knock came at the door. Though I was afraid it was one of the " staff " come to complain about something —myself possibly—I bade her enter.

To my amazement it was Dorothea herself who entered, and even more to my amazement she was followed by Angus. I realised the wretched man was ashamed and repentant at last, and come to make a handsome statement to that effect.

His face was scarlet ; so was Dorothea's.

On second thoughts a less pleasing solution struck me. He bore an air of guilt rather than elation, and Dorothea seemed dreadfully embarrassed.

I jumped from my chair. " He's been doing it again ? " I thundered.

I really was put out, for after my rigid vigilance it seemed most disappointing.

He did not deny it, merely got redder, if possible, and Dorothea turned her face away.

"It's—it's very dreadful," I stuttered. I think I was more ashamed than Angus, who wore the fatal dogged expression I knew so well. It means he is going to do exactly as he likes.

Dorothea looked meaningly at Angus, and Angus looked shamefacedly at Dorothea, and ignored her signals.

"If you please, sir," she said, turning to me, and speaking in a rush, "we thought maybe we'd get married."

My breath was taken away. Then I saw it all! They were both absurdly devoted to me, and counted the great sacrifice nothing if it was to delight me.

I stood up. "I refuse to hear of this," I said at once.

"But, *sir*——" it was Dorothea again.

"I absolutely refuse to accept such a sacrifice," I said firmly. "It's not to be thought of for a moment."

"Please sir, we thought of it entirely ourselves," said Dorothea piteously.

"I thank you, but it cannot be."

"We thought you'd be pleased, sir? You was always praising us up to each other."

"Till I saw it was useless, that nothing would conquer the dislike you bore to each other. Oh, Dorothea, I never thought *you* would think of marrying a man you hated!"

She went very red, and looked at Angus and wriggled. Angus went very red and wriggled too; but neither of them said a word.

" I am very much touched at your consideration for my wishes," I went on, " but it can never be. We will dismiss the subject from our minds."

Dorothea began to cry, which upset me very much. Then she turned on Angus, " You great Gahoo *you*, it's all your fault ! " she blazed.

Angus shuffled with his feet, and looked very miserable ; after one or two husky attempts at speech, he abandoned the attempt, and just stared helplessly at Dorothea.

" *I'm* not going to do all the dirty work ! " said Dorothea.

Angus looked cowed, he wiped his face and blew as noisily as if he had been running.

" Wimmin ain't never satisfied till they've got a husband," he said at length, " it's their nature. I was ready to oblige Dorothea, her bein' that willin'. I ain't specially agin it, sir."

" Speak for yourself," exclaimed Dorothea very indignantly. " It isn't me as is set on bein' married, certainly not to a chap like that ! " She pointed derisively to Angus with a mocking little laugh.

Angus made a threatening stride towards her, but under the severity of my gaze he stopped abruptly, his arms hanging by his side. He looked extremely foolish, and I think his discomfiture amused Dorothea.

" I've half a mind to take up along of Jim Waters, sir, if you have no objection ? " She ignored Angus entirely. " You see there's no nonsense about *him ;* he axes one proper, an' doesn't want to back out, an' it's the banns *he* would be havin' up at onst ! "

Angus' face went a curious dark shade ; he made one stride towards Dorothea, and grabbed her arm and

shook her. "You aggravatin' baggage," he said rudely, "I've picked yer, an' there's the end of it! You as much as look at another chap, an' I'll bash in his head for 'im!" Then he turned to me—I had been on the point of saving Dorothea again—and said doggedly, "We're *both* willin', sir, an' won't serve you worse double nor single. It's time Dorothea had a master."

"An' him a missus," retorted Dorothea, looking scornfully at her suitor.

"Look here," I said desperately, "that's all very well, and I'm very much obliged and thoroughly appreciate your kindness, but I won't be a party to any one marrying unless they care for each other. Such unions are an—an offence, and I forbid your marriage."

Dorothea looked as if she was going to cry again, Angus as if he wanted to swear. They looked at each other in a desperate sort of way, both seeming to urge the other to say something.

"I don't object to him anythin' to matter," said Dorothea at length very softly.

"Nor me neither," said Angus eagerly. "Dorothea ain't so bad—as wimmin go. Wimmin bein' wimmin, I ain't one to go expectin' much."

"But that's not—not the right spirit at all," I objected.

Angus groaned, and went a fiery red, "I'm rare fond of Dorothea," he said, as if the words were being dragged from him against his will, "she's so aggravatin'! I've never made up to a single female woman, though there's a-many as tried it on—till I got soft on Dorothea—the *madam!*"

"An' I'm willin' to take him, an' larn him a bit about

wimmin," said Dorothea in a rush before I could speak. "I never could abide them others what fair buzzed after me in troops——"

Angus made a derisive sound.

Dorothea affected not to hear. "More like an army than anythink," she went on, "but I'd as lief have Angus as be single."

"You are sure he is not trying to make you marry him against your will?"

Angus answered before Dorothea had time.

"There's many a woman *un*married against her will," he said, "but I haven't strook any of the others yet, meself. I hadn't to ax her twice, I can tell you, sir!"

"You an' your axin'!" retorted Dorothea reddening. "A fair show you made of yourself, stammerin' like a looney! I only took you straight off out of pity, so there!"

"Yer took me straight off, 'cos you was feared yer wouldn't be axed twice," said Angus fiercely, "and neither yer *would* have been!"

"Yes, I would——"

"Yer *wouldn't*——"

They had apparently forgotten me until I interrupted them to say how pleased I was, and what arrangements I thought of making.

They went away beaming.

Unfortunately I went into the housekeeper's room as usual that evening, and got a glimpse of Angus with his arms round Dorothea, kissing her as if he never meant to stop. I crept away unnoticed, feeling rather out of things. Sometimes I feel dreadfully envious of the man who gardens. He is going to have a wife—a charming wife—of his own. His master will have to

be content to look at happiness through another man's eyes.

It was odd that the question of Dorothea and Angus should come up the next time I dined at the Hall. Pollyt and I were alone with the wine, and I care neither for wine nor the company of the squire. I'm afraid I had rather longing eyes fixed upon the door.

I think he noticed, but he was not put out as I had expected, he "hawed" in quite a genial fashion, and said he "had been there himself"—whatever that might mean—then he asked casually, "By the by, when is the fair Dorothea going?"

"She is not going?" I said, astonished that such a rumour had got about. "I hope she never will. She is going to marry Angus—the man who gardens."

"An excellent arrangement," he said heartily. "I congratulate you! Haw, you are a clever fellow, Delland!"

I am not clever, and I have the grace to know it. It gave me no pleasure to hear the squire say so.

"I think it is Angus who is to be congratulated," I said coldly.

Pollyt laughed till I thought he would choke. He said I was a humourist, and that a sense of humour was a great possession. He said I made him laugh more than anybody he knew, and that I was no end of a sly dog.

Then to my relief he suggested that we should join the ladies.

He laughed at my eager assent as if that were funny too. He was still laughing when we went into the big double drawing-room.

Miss Pollyt was by the piano—she plays beautifully

—and the squire joined the fashionable wife at the other end of the room, so that we were in one room, they in the other. It was a very pleasant arrangement.

Miss Pollyt played to me for a while, and then she went upstairs to fetch a wrap; for out in the moonlit-garden was veritable fairyland.

I waited for her in the veranda, hearing the conversation of the squire and the fashionable wife as one in a dream. They were talking of some friends.

"No, there can be no doubt," said the fashionable wife, "it's as good as settled; in fact, I expect to hear of it any day. His attentions have been most marked from the first; and you think she will accept him?"

"My dear girl, that's the extraordinary part of it. I don't mean her accepting him—for it's a good provision—but her obvious condition! She simply can't hide her feelings——"

"You don't mean——? A man like that!"

"But I do, head over ears, my dear, and she's taken it uncommonly violently! And of course he . . . but that's not to be wondered at. Mind you, he's not the fool he seems—not by a long chalk!—and though his puritanical outlook threw me off my balance at first, I soon realised he was an extra cunning beggar, and not at all puritanical—merely hypocritical! He pretended not to understand; it's rather a strong attitude! Of course he's got a sense of humour, but I must say I should have thought him the last man in the world she'd fall madly in love with, but it's providential, and a great weight off my mind."

Then I moved out of hearing.

When Miss Pollyt came down with her pretty wrap,

we sat near the sundial and continued our discussion on the matter of heredity. We were both interested in the question, and tried to think of instances to prove our special argument, and knew instances which went to prove much.

We were so interested that we quite forgot the time, and were horrified to hear twelve strike.

"What must you think of me," I exclaimed, springing up, "but really time flies when I am with you."

"Does it?" said Miss Pollyt in a low voice, "it certainly has flown to-night for both of us. Let us go back to the veranda, and see if uncle is looking cross and tired. He likes to go to bed strictly at eleven, you know."

We went and peeped in, and found the squire and his wife—who doesn't look so fashionable in repose—sound asleep.

"The front door won't be locked," whispered Miss Pollyt, "just get your coat and slip away, and I will creep up to bed. Then they will wake up to find you gone—because you did not wish to disturb their slumbers—and I apparently asleep in my bed for quite a long time! It will make apologies necessary on their side rather than ours, which is always satisfactory, I think."

Her eyes twinkled mischievously.

I agreed, and we carried out the programme without a hitch. They believed I had left early, and Miss Pollyt to be soundly asleep.

I'm afraid we carried out the same plan more than once. It was so very easy! I don't think either the squire or the fashionable wife minded. They just went to sleep when they felt inclined after dinner, and

went to bed when they woke up ; and never bothered about us.

The more I saw of Miss Pollyt, the more interesting I found her, and the more I coveted her lovely clothes for my poor shabby Sophonisba.

But of Sophonisba herself I seemed to see less, instead of more, as time went on, and the fact made me very unhappy.

CHAPTER XXIII

'MELIA-HANN PROFFERS ADVICE

'MELIA-HANN was giving me advice over the hedge.

"Why don't yer get married?" she demanded.

I forget what excuse I offered. I reminded her of her own objections.

"It's different for a woman," she said, "but the man can take it easy. I finks you should do it, mister. A gent like you could 'ave yer pick all round abouts."

I laughed at this quaint idea.

"Well, *try* 'em, if yer don't believe me! A chap what can 'ave a motor if 'e likes, an' live on the fat of the land every day for 'is dinner!" She smacked her lips at the thought. "Now you look *'ere!* You're bound to be 'ad in the hend, 'cos men alluys *is;* so if you take my advice you'll do it yourself to save 'avin' it done *for* yer—see! Gents go for looks, folk say, an' I dunno as I altogether blames 'em, but looks don't wear, an' tempers does! If I was you, mister, I fink I'd marry Miss Soapy."

I dropped my spade, and could feel the blood rushing to my head. What had put the idea into the child's sharp head! Of course she was friend to the

pair of us, but even she must have guessed it would be easier to me to fly than to marry Sophonisba. Did she suspect me of wanting to? Was the secret, so skilfully hidden from all the world, no secret to the shrewd 'Melia-Hann? It seemed rather like it. It put me in a fuss at once. Suppose she mentioned it to Sophonisba, who would at once refuse to speak to me at all! Suppose it got round to Mrs. Kearness, who would think it her duty to at once put a stop to our meeting!

I wiped my face, which was damp with horror.

"'Andsome is as 'andsome does," observed 'Melia-Hann. I think she said it to comfort me, and to imply that looks weren't everything.

I tried to make a joke out of my embarrassment, "I'm afraid," I said, with a sickly smile, "that even if I wanted a wife, there's nobody would have me."

"Go hon with your jokes! What a puffict cure you are! The vicarage young ladies, they are beauties, but they ain't your style, an' the squire's niece is too grand for you, an' terrible clever they say, which must be very awkward for an 'usbint who likes to fink 'e knows everythink. 'An' Mrs. Gellet's 'air is dyed something crool, as folk can see wiff 'alf an eye; an' she's older than what you are, and worrited that poor major of hern right into his grave, pore fellar, she *did!*"

"Be quiet, 'Melia-Hann!" I cried. I was shocked she should say such things.

I explained with some severity that Major Gellet had been killed in the Boer War.

'Melia-Hann refused to accept my reproof. "There's folk as'll sooner face a bullet nor their wives."

" Every husband worthy of the name gives his wife her own way," I said.

" It's different *givin'* to 'avin' it *took*, mister."

And I suppose it is—when one comes to think of it.

" You marries one of them as 'as done all the takin' all their lives, and where are you, mister! Lookin' pretty silly, I guess! They're goin' on takin' all the more, that's what they get you *for!* Miss Soapy now as 'ad to do all the givin'. *Thems* the kind for men to marry, never mindin' their face. They come cheap too. Now if you get one you've picked for her face an' figger, when they says as the cash'll have to go on it, where *are* you! Now you take my advice, an' fix it up with Miss Soapy——"

" My dear child," I burst out irritably, " that's all very well, but the fixing up—as you call it!—doesn't depend alone upon me; it also depends on Miss Sophonisba."

" Oh, she'll jump, same as the others," said 'Melia-Hann laconically. " Jes' you try her, mister."

But I had no wish to make Sophonisba jump either with surprise or disgust, and I'm afraid I rather snubbed 'Melia-Hann.

She was plainly hurt. " All right, mister, I can take my 'ook without all that 'intin'. It's only because I takes a hinterest in yer."

I thanked her for her interest, and regretted I had done nothing to deserve it.

" It's what you 'aven't done," she retorted. " You've spoke to me as if I was flesh and blood same as yourself, an' not just one of ' the Poor.' "

" How else could I have spoken to you? " I exclaimed.

" As hif I was a blarsted noosance," she returned.

" They mostly does; it's 'uman natur', I 'spose, only I dunno as it 'appens to be very funny when you are one of the Poor."

" But good gracious——" I began indignantly.

She did not let me finish, instead she remarked pityingly that I'd plenty to learn.

" Sometimes I finks," she added, " that you must 'ave been put away afore you come 'ere."

" *Put away?* " I echoed, puzzled.

" 'Sylum, you know—for folks queer in their yeads."

I was hurt.

" I have never been a genius," I said sharply—which was a silly sort of thing to say. " At the college where I taught for seventeen years they believed me to possess a certain intelligence."

" Who did you teach? Wimmin? "

" Heaven forbid! " I exclaimed in horror. As if women would ever have let such as I teach them! " I taught boys."

" Oh, them," said 'Melia-Hann contemptuously, " I don't count boys; I've never met a man what had any gumption yet—nor don't hexpect to neither! "

She took the roses I had gathered for her and departed, leaving me digesting her advice.

If only I could have taken it!

CHAPTER XXIV

PANSY HAS MUCH TO SAY

GREATLY to my secret relief, Dorothea declined to go away for a honeymoon. "With a great Gahoo like that, sir?" she exclaimed with much scorn, "not me!"

"But perhaps Angus —— ?" I ventured.

"If 'e wants it, he can have it—to himself, sir!"

"Honeymoons is all spendin' money," was Angus' comment on the situation. "Dorothea gives herself airs enough as it is."

On the great day of his life, Angus departed in his best clothes and worst temper. They were married in the morning, and I was amazed when Dorothea brought in my lunch as if nothing had happened. In the afternoon, Angus appeared in his old clothes carrying the spade, and also looking as if nothing had happened.

"But Angus, you've been married!" I gasped as he began to dig. "It's your wedding-day, man!" Imagine behaving in such an everyday fashion on such a remarkable occasion!

"Ay," he said, "you never spoke a truer word, sir! I've been an' done it now, an' it ain't no good repentin'. You never know wimmin, and where they'll have you—leastways not till it's too late! Yes, she set her mind on getting me, an' she got me, which is mostly what it comes to. 'Tanyrate *she's* happy an' joyful!"

" How can you talk like that—and about Dorothea ! I thought you were really fond of her ! " I exclaimed indignantly.

" I was coortin' her then, an' it was all right to be a bit soft, but I'm wedded to her now, and no chap what respects himself is soft on his wife. She's my missus, I'm her master, an' there's all there is about it."

" You ought to be with her now, telling her how proud and happy you feel."

" That would be giving her a fine conceit of herself, which she don't need, and maybe I'll see a sight too much of her now ! "

" I am disgusted and astonished ! I thought you loved Dorothea."

He wriggled uncomfortably ; then he said that the parson had pointed out to him that it was his duty to love Dorothea, and he'd never been specially " strook on duty."

" It is more than a duty, a great happiness surely, and what a privilege, Angus ! "

" Agin wimmin as wimmin I have nothing to say, sir, seein' as I've gone and let one make me into a married man ; but wimmin as idols is a fair silly game, an' I'm not takin' a hand in it ! "

" Did you feel nervous walking up the aisle to be married ? " I asked.

Cowardly idiot that I am, I could walk bravely enough to such a goal with Sophonisba ! I should be too happy and too proud to be afraid.

" Ay, proper nervous ! I nearly come out again sooner'n I went in."

" Was Dorothea nervous ? "

" Wimmin ain't, sir, they're too glad to find

theirselves in port at last. She stood there bold as brass——"

"I think we will drop the subject," I said, utterly disgusted with the unappreciative bridegroom, "and attend to something else instead."

"Ay, sir; them young cabbages need planting out."

So we planted out the young cabbages, and Angus seemed more himself.

Now they are married, things go on the same as usual, and the young couple seem quite contented. I imagine both have wills of their own, but I have an idea Dorothea gets more of her own way than Angus, which is as it should be.

Pansy came down the minute she heard about it.

I was pleased to find she thoroughly approved.

"You have no idea what a relief it is to my mind, Edward," she said. "*All* housekeepers that are not elderly, should be married."

"Quite so," I agreed readily.

"*All* husbands should live on the premises," she went on to assert.

"Quite so," I said again.

Pansy seemed to have heard of all my kind friends—how I cannot say—but, unfortunately, she had nothing good to say of any of them.

She started by saying it was disgraceful.

"What is?" I asked.

"Oh, Edward, don't pretend! All of them, and Mrs. Gellet especially!"

"Mrs. Gellet is charming and most kind," I said hotly.

Then she said what 'Melia-Hann had said of Mrs. Gellet, only more so, and added, "*All* widows are on the look-out."

" On the look out for what ? " I asked, puzzled.

" *All* widows know the ropes and are dangerous," was how she answered me.

" What ropes, and dangerous to whom ? "

" The community at large—specially the male one, which goes about thinking them all angels. It oughtn't to be allowed. One is enough for any really *nice* woman."

" Do you mean husband ? Then she's only had one," I returned triumphantly.

" *So far,* Edward ! "

I remembered having seen her in earnest conversation with the young man at the bank, and wondered if Pansy meant something of that sort. I asked her.

" She's sure to marry him," snorted Pansy, " if only because he's twenty-five and she's over forty."

" How can you say such a thing ! " I exclaimed. " Why, she hasn't one grey hair ! And then her complexion ! "

" It costs a good deal in up-keep one way and another," she said coldly, " but I don't wonder at her doing it ! It hides a lot, and then innocents go about asking for it, and admiring it in good faith ! I have no patience with that sort of thing ! *All* middle-aged women flatter themselves they look about thirty."

" Then, what are you, Pansy ? " I asked. I knew she was exactly fifty-one.

" When I become middle-aged, I shan't be afraid to say so," she answered tartly, " but I've always been taken for Ethel's elder sister."

Pansy is indeed remarkably young-looking ; at the same time her reply was scarcely logical.

I returned to Mrs. Gellet, " Then you think she is going to be married again ? " I asked, interested.

"*All* those sort of widows think they are going to be married again," asserted Pansy. "I thought the young man at the bank was, however, merely just being kept on in case——"

"In case of what?"

"Other plans falling through. Next time you meet her out of doors, notice her hair when the sun is on it. I have no objection to women dying their hair as long as it looks as if it *isn't* dyed—but it always does! And there's the pink you buy, and the pink you have—or, haven't—by nature, and that's easily detected too! Mind you, it's the detection that matters, not the thing itself."

Then she abruptly changed the subject, as she has a way of doing, and began to talk of Miss Pollyt.

Here she was all prejudice and sweeping assertions again.

"*All* women writers do things," she said.

"What things?" I not unnaturally enquired.

"Things they shouldn't!"

"Bosh!" I was rude enough to exclaim.

"Sometimes it's their mode of life," she looked at me darkly, "sometimes it's their friends, sometimes it's their books; but it's always *something*."

"Her book was charming," I said warmly, and added with cunning, "and made a lot of money." I knew that would appeal to Pansy.

It didn't, however. "Oh, she writes that sort of books, does she?" she asked with a snort. "I do not know how anybody can read them, let alone write them! Disgusting!"

I listened, marvelling on the mystery of Pansy's locked desk.

"Has frocks from Paris, I suppose?"

I laughed at the idea. "Why, they are the most simple and inexpensive-looking frocks I've ever seen!" I exclaimed. "The fashionable wife looks outrageously over-dressed beside her."

"*All* simplicity costs money," asserted Pansy, which I thought the most absurd of her many absurd statements. "The greater the elegant simplicity, the greater the cost! Do you mean the squire's wife? Have you been up there much?"

"Oh, yes," I laughed, "I am coming on, Pansy, quite a Society man in my old age!"

"And this authoress-creature talks a lot to you, encourages you?"

"She does!" I exclaimed gratefully.

"And is by way of being a beauty—*for* an authoress?"

"For anybody," I said.

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-five, I should think."

"Hum! Getting on for forty, and hard up, I expect."

"It's abominable that any one with her talent should be hard up for a moment!" I exclaimed. "She's quite young, and ever so fascinating and kind!"

"Quite so! Even female writers are women, and much the same as the rest of the world when it comes to that sort of thing—though, I suppose, they pretend they're not! I expect she's been making copy of you."

"Oh, no!" I exclaimed in horror. "She would never do a thing like that!"

"How do you know, Edward? Haven't you heard that writers will make 'copy' out of their dying grand-

mothers and things. They can't *help* it, it's part of the —the unfortunate temperament. They have no conscience ; all they think of is a sale and fame and rubbish like that. *All* writers use up their acquaintances, caricature them if it suits, and collect characters like butterflies."

I thought of a case of butterflies the squire had, all of the pretty or strange creatures with a pin through their middles. Did writers have cases full of " characters " with a pen, instead of a pin, attaching them to the board, until such time as they would be required for a book ? It was a very painful thought, and I would not believe it of Miss Pollyt.

I said as much to Pansy.

" I know more of your precious Miss Pollyt than you think, through a friend of mine whose cousin goes often to her flat, and interviews her. It's a horrid, poky little flat without even a servant, and Miss Pollyt goes about in swell Society in gowns by Doucet, and all the leading British, French and Vienna firms. One knows what that means ! After thirty one has to dress quite regardless of expense if one still hopes to manage it. She's never had a single relation to stay with her. That sort of thing speaks for itself."

That it might also speak for the relations did not seem to occur to Pansy.

" She has no relation save her uncle," I said, " and he's far too big and important to fit in a flat like that. He prefers a suite at the Savoy when he's in Town."

" People that haven't a spare room for relations find one for friends," sniffed Pansy.

I said nothing.

" *All* celebrities make bad wives," asserted Pansy.

" They put themselves on a pedestal and expect the person they have honoured by marrying, to worship them for the rest of their days. So silly ! "

I said I did not think it necessary for Miss Pollyt to put herself on a pedestal, since it was her natural place, and that any man would be only too proud and happy to be allowed to worship her.

" *All* author-people just regard the Divorce Court as an advertisement," she went on.

" For whom ? " I asked.

" Don't pretend, Edward ! For their books, of course. All they really ever think of is advertisement."

" Tom wants to come down and cheer you up—perhaps his next holiday," continued Pansy inconsequently.

She went on to tell me how well Tom was getting on, and how rich he promised to be. " There's nothing like brains," she added cheerfully. " *All* people with brains make money."

" Do they ? " I asked astonished. I had not always found it so.

" Of course they do, if they don't, they simply haven't brains, and aren't to be blamed, just pitied, poor creatures ; and one can't count them." Then she went rather red. " Of course there are probably exceptions, Edward, and I meant nothing personal ; a man in your position does not need to make money, only to spend it—in moderation of course."

I asked her if she thought money mattered before anything else in the world.

She was very indignant at such a " sordid idea." She said only vulgar people thought it of too much importance, and that it didn't matter at all—as long

as one had plenty. One just disregarded it in a well-bred fashion.

On our way to the station we met Sophonisba face to face.

I raised my hat, blushing deeply. I saw so little of her now.

She gave me a frigid bow and passed on.

"The other Miss Kearness?" asked Pansy, looking after her. "The Soapy one? What a face! What a figure!"

I went hot. Pansy was getting "warm"

What if she saw my confusion and guessed its cause! It was an awful moment.

Then I observed with relief she was too busy looking after Sophonisba to notice me at all.

"I suppose there are compensations," she said half to herself. "There's one of them safe at any rate, and that's something to be thankful for."

Then she turned to me. "I suppose you don't see much of *that* one?"

I had, indeed, seen so little of Sophonisba that I was able to tell the truth. "Oh, *no!*" I said. "She —she's rather different, you see." I meant she was so far above my reach, even farther than other beautiful women.

"She's certainly very different," agreed Pansy, "but when there are five, one has to look for one to be different. Mrs. Kearness has been far more lucky than she deserved, *I* consider. And a husband like that!"

"He's rather frightful, certainly," I said.

"I consider him worse than frightful! If there had been five the same!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE SUDDEN DEPARTURE OF MISS POLLYT

I WISH 'Melia-Hann and Pansy had not said what they did about Mrs. Gellet, for it was most cruel and unjust, and made me seem to see her in a different light.

I happened to come across her standing at her gate talking to the young man from the bank. It was the first time I had seen her without a veil and a pink-lined parasol, and with the sun on her hair. I could not help noticing that her pretty hair had blacky sort of bits at the roots, and that some of them had a grey appearance. I know, of course, that it is the lovely gold that is real, but I do wish she did not blacken the roots. And then her pink cheeks are *quite* a different sort of pink from the lovely pink of Sophonisba's, and not nearly so nice without hat and veil and parasol.

It was a relief to me to meet her a little later with hat and veil and parasol, and to find she was as beautiful as ever, in spite of the wicked things said by 'Melia-Hann and Pansy.

I once asked Pansy why women wore veils—like most men, I hate them.

She had said, "To hide the complexions they haven't got!"

Pansy never wears one, she says she hopes not to need to for ages yet.

I am rather upset about Miss Pollyt's sudden departure, the whole thing took me so very much by surprise.

The last time I saw her I was talking to Sophonisba —or more correctly, listening to her, and looking at her very hard, and thinking how lovely she was and how out of reach, and yet how dreadfully I loved her, when the squire and niece came suddenly upon us.

I do not think I should have seen them if Sophonisba hadn't bowed to them.

Then, though Sophonisba was there, and I never want anybody else when I have Sophonisba, I greeted them warmly enough.

Pollyt had evidently been walking very fast, for his face was purple.

He said "haw!" at me in a most offensive way, and looked at Sophonisba as if she was nobody of importance, and had no right to be at my own gate. It made me feel that I should have to be rude to him before long.

Miss Pollyt was looking frightfully ill, and quite changed. I had never seen her in the least like that before, and I remembered that at one time she had suffered dreadfully from neuritis in her arm, and was always in dread of another attack. I could not but suppose the pain had returned, for though she was smiling bravely, she could not hide her suffering from me.

Her smile to me seemed almost strained, and if it wasn't that I felt sure the pain in her arm had returned, I should have been a little hurt and less sure of her

friendship. She looked at me in a tired, bored fashion, and it seemed like a dream to think of all the intimate conversations we had had together.

She shook hands with Sophonisba, and was very bright and friendly with her, and had a lot to say. The squire stood fuming in the background, glaring at everybody in turn.

Sophonisba was very silent, and rather stiff with Miss Pollyt, I thought; and I'm afraid Miss Pollyt noticed it. She kept looking at her in such a puzzled way when Sophonisba didn't notice, and from her to me as if there was something she could not understand. I think she thought it odd I never had mentioned Sophonisba to her—and that she guessed my secret at once and was sorry for me, for she must have known how hopeless were my dreams!

"Come, Marcia!" cried Pollyt impatiently.

Miss Pollyt moved at once. She shook hands with Sophonisba, and then turned to me, holding out her hand with a gay little laugh, which somehow hurt me rather.

"I'm afraid we shall not be able to finish our discussions," she said, "for I leave to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" I gasped, and I could feel my face fall. "But you were going to the flower-show next week——"

"Ah, I had not got my summons then," she returned at once. "You know, Mr. Delland, we workers are not always quite our own masters, and a writer has to consider his public, and his publishers. Go, I must! Mustn't I, uncle?"

I took her hand for a moment.

Pollyt glared afresh at everybody, Sophonisba get-

ting rather more than her share, I thought, "Haw—yes," he said. "Naturally my niece cannot waste too much of her time in social deserts, when the great world is calling her and resenting her absence."

He looked fondly, and yet with a sort of furious, amazed pity, at her. He is devoted to Miss Pollyt, there can be no doubt of it, the fashionable wife is much less to him, I think; but then she is only a Pollyt on sufferance, and though perfectly courteous to her, I don't think he's the sort of man to forget that he, his boys, and Marcia represent "The Family."

"Oh, no, indeed!" cried Miss Pollyt quickly, "I have enjoyed myself more than I can say! I shall try to get up an argument to defeat yours for the next time we meet, Mr. Delland."

She passed on laughing.

I ran out into the road after her. I wanted to know if I could send her up some roses now and then. I heard the squire say huskily, "Buck up, Marcia. It can't mean much to you! A fool, an outsider——"

And I heard her reply—and the tone of it was dreadful to me, for it seemed full of almost unbearable agony. "Hush, uncle, how dare you suppose such a thing. It has already passed out of my life; it is forgotten."

Then I realised she was speaking of some past sorrow, and that it was not the time to intrude, and came back to Sophonisba.

She eyed me curiously.

"I think she's the loveliest, the cleverest, the smartest woman I've ever seen," she said slowly. "One would think she would only have to put out

her hand, and all that she desired would drop into it, and yet it hasn't, yet it hasn't ! "

" Why do you say that, and how do you know ? " I asked.

" I know," she answered positively. " One would think that *any* man would have to fall dreadfully in love with her, wouldn't you ? "

" I expect lots *do*," I answered.

" Of course they do, but perhaps there is just one that doesn't, and that one is the one who counts ! One hears of such things. It must be pretty rotten."

" Oh, quite impossible," I exclaimed, " unless, of course, he was already in love with somebody else."

She went the lovely pink that is such a different shade to Mrs. Gellet's ; perhaps some people might think Mrs. Gellet had the advantage, because her colour never changes with heat or cold or anything, and Sophonisba's is changing all the time. Miss Pollyt's altered, too, in a very interesting fashion, for one could run across her and find her with the most gorgeous colour, and the last time I had seen her, she had had no colour at all ; not even in her lips.

" I can't stand the squire ! " said Sophonisba suddenly.

" Neither can I. I am always wanting to be rude."

" Why just *wantin' ?* It would do him good to have somebody to stand up to him."

" It's so humiliating to be rude without being smart."

" Then be smart *and* rude."

" I will try," I promised her.

" He and his ' haws ' ! " she exclaimed.

" I've seen nothing of you lately ? " I complained.

" Oh, I've been busy."

"Then you've been *too* busy," I cried hotly, for she was looking far from well. I was furious with Mrs. Kearness. What right had she to let Sophonisba be busy? And, then, holes everywhere—worse than ever! Mrs. Kearness didn't seem very good at mending.

I think Sophonisba noticed the direction of my eyes, for she sighed, and said there came a time when holes quite outran all mending, "I mend one hole, and two others appear," she said gloomily.

"Doesn't your mother mend them?" I asked sharply.

She opened her lovely eyes at me. "How silly you are, Mr. Delland! Poor mother has more than her hands full with the house and the pater and the parish! She does a lot of work outside, you know."

"That's all very well," I began, then I stopped abruptly. After all I could not decry Mrs. Kearness to her daughter. If she could not see that Sophonisba came before the house and the parish and Mr. Kearness, it made matters entirely hopeless. It seemed to me a very shocking case of maternal neglect. There have been women brought up for cruelty for less, I feel sure.

"Have *you* ever thought of marryin'?" asked Sophonisba suddenly, in a queer tone.

I had thought of little else, and yet the question took me entirely by surprise. I looked away from her, my face scarlet. "It may have occurred at times," I stammered.

"And, of course, you meant somebody awfully lovely?"

"The loveliest of them all!" I gasped, wondering at my own audacity. She must know so well who was queen of all the rest.

"Some say Grace, some Doris," she said.

"Do they?" I wondered what was said about them.

"You meant Kathleen or Gladys?"

Sophonisba was only too ready to show me how absurd I was being. She would not even understand.

"I meant none of them," I said stiffly.

Sophonisba looked startled, and as if she would have liked to cry with vexation. "Oh, I always put my big foot in it!" she cried. "Whatever will you think of me? Seemin' to offer. . . . But I thought you wanted helpin' . . . some men do!"

She broke off suddenly, and stamped her foot. "Some of them want *more* than helpin', they want shovin' all the way!" she burst out, "and shootin', most of all!"

"Do you mean I'm one of the men you think wants shooting?" I asked hurt.

"And hangin', drawin' an' quarterin'," she said fiercely. "You take the biscuit, you do really! And then to go on actin' the shy-widow sort of game. No wonder Amelia says you're a cure! I'm beginnin' to think so myself."

"I'm not, indeed I'm not!" I pleaded agonised. "I'm dense and dull, and a fool, but I'm not a cure, really on my word of honour, I am not, Sophonisba! And I'm awfully sorry about your worries; it must be dreadful, but I feel sure everything will come right in the end."

"It's about time it started then! Oh, here's Amelia," she broke off. "I wonder what *she* wants."

'Melia-Hann seemed delighted to find us together.

"That's the ticket," she said encouragingly, "don't

you let 'im choke you off it, Miss Soapy, it's just his fun, 'im bein' such a cure ! Looks ain't much when it comes to livin' with 'em ; don't you worrit, Miss Soapy, it's 'andsome is as 'andsome does, an' we all know about that——"

"Don't talk nonsense, Amelia," said Sophonisba sharply. "How is your grandmother ? "

"She's orderin' her burial robes, Miss Soapy, her an' me 'ave fixed on one kind, but till you've seen 'em, we ain't decidin' nothin'. She's very near the hend, an' that's a fact, but everythin' is to be done real genteel, an' it's a great comfort to her to know it, an' fix it all up so grand-like ! Eh, but I'd like a funeral to make folk stare if it were me, an' I'd be fit to bust myself wiff pride, but granny, she——"

"I will go round that way now," said Sophonisba, departing hastily.

Then 'Melia-Hann turned gravely to me.

CHAPTER XXVI

I BEHAVE VERY BADLY INDEED

"WELL, mister, 'ave yer done it?"

I went most frightfully red. "Done *what?*" I asked.

"Walked out Miss Soapy? Let 'er see as 'ow you meant bus'ness?"

"I—I don't think so!" I gasped in confusion.

"Then fink again, mister! Second foughts is best, I've 'eard. There ain't nobody else on the premises, is there?" She looked at me anxiously.

"Really Amelia! There is nobody—don't talk nonsense! I—er—how is your father going on, now?"

"Somethink awful," she replied with gloomy pride. "Fings is all any'ow at 'ome, an' of course you've 'eard about Tommie Burt?"

"No," I said, glad to get to her affairs and leave my own alone.

From her delighted surprise that I had not heard, I surmised Tommie had once more broken out.

"'E's been took," she announced gleefully.

"Er—where?" I asked cautiously. I wondered if she meant to a Better World.

"To the Deformatory," she announced dramatically.

I do not know why Amelia will allude to these

excellent institutions as *De*formatories instead of *Re*formatories.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"It was a real 'orrible crime!" She plunged with gusto into awful details.

Very sharply I bade her desist.

She stared at me with her mouth open. "Don't you like 'orrors? Why, mister, you *knowed* 'im!" She seemed to think the acquaintanceship of such a celebrity must be a great source of pride to me. "We're the talk of the place, owin' to Tommie bein' a relation, an' 'avin' 'ad tea wiff us the very day 'e done it."

"If you say any more about anything so—so beastly," I burst out, "I shall go away, Amelia. You have made me feel quite sick. Hanging is too good for the unspeakable little wretch! Now no more of Tommie Burt, you understand?"

"Comes o' bein' queer in the yead, I suppose," she exclaimed, astonished. "Eh, but you little know what you're missin'. I was only aleadin' up to the worst when you stopped me. After 'e'd——'

"*Amelia!*"

"It'll be in the paper," she said a little sulkily, "the *Daily Mail.*" She licked her lips unctuously.

"Lor, if there ain't squire a'comin'!" gasped 'Melia-Hann. She stared at the great man with her sharp eyes, and made the most perfunctory of curtseys.

He glared at both of us. For some time he had been very offensive indeed to me, and I was no longer honoured with invitations to the Hall, for which I was duly grateful, as I certainly should not have accepted them without the saving presence of Miss Pollyt. I believe he had suddenly—for some reason or other—taken

rather a violent dislike to me; the fashionable wife *just* bowed, and that was all, when I met her. It was next door to a cut direct.

"Haw, Delland, at your old games! Philandering with village girls! Quite your usual occupation, haw!"

He looked at 'Melia-Hann, first as if she had no right to exist, and secondly as if he had made up his mind she should be non-existent, and consequently was. My blood began to get very hot indeed. I did not mind so much about myself, but I minded very much for 'Melia-Hann.

He laughed in an offensive fashion as he looked me up and down. "Haw, bizarre tastes, it seems, the more like a gargoyle the better, I suppose!"

I was furious. 'Melia-Hann is not a pretty child, but she bears no likeness whatsoever to the awful old gargoyles on the church. There is one curiously like the rector. I have often wondered if he has noticed it himself. Sophonisba had spoken of this particular gargoyle. "I call it mine," she said, "for obvious reasons." I imagined she saw the resemblance herself.

As I could think of nothing to say, I said nothing, but I could feel that I was beginning to lose control of my temper.

He was in a temper too.

"Philandering with village maids is all very well," he burst out, "and no more than they have the right to expect, but when it comes, haw, to attempting the same sort of game with those of a social status and importance far superior to your own, it's the damndest cheek I've ever heard! D'yer hear? Delland, *haw!*"

I did not in the least know what he was talking about, nor did I in the least care. I merely saw he was trying how rude and offensive he could be, and how much the poor fool of a worm was going to stand! Well, I was not going to stand any more. I had lost my own temper, and lost it badly! I was going to be rude and offensive too, and—so it seemed to me—smart at the same time. The remark might not be worthy of great wits, but it was an achievement for me, and I was childishly vain of it till cooler moments and better thoughts came.

"Haw?" he said again.

I leaned over the gate. "Why do you *always* 'haw' before you 'hee'?" I asked deliberately, looking him between the eyes.

I had one appreciative listener. 'Melia-Hann's sharp wits saw it at once. The squire is not so quick as the village child he despises, and he merely saw that something offensive was meant, but not exactly what. It dawned upon me I should have to put it almost plainer.

The badly-stifled mirth of 'Melia-Hann incensed him.

"What d'yer mean, Delland? Haw! You're a low, common fella! Why do——"

"I mean that it would be more suitable if you 'hee'd before you *hawed*,'" I explained elaborately. "Why put the cart before the . . . donkey?"

I think a retort rather loses its force when insisted upon, and pointed out, but otherwise he would not have seen it. He was beginning to see it now.

He swelled like the frog in the fable, and grew perilously purple. "What the devil . . . ! What d'yer mean? You and your hee—haw!"

And then he saw it! And saw then that he himself had said it!

I thought he was going to have a fit, and on my gate; then I saw it was but a fit of passion. He raised his stick, hitting blindly at me and then at the hedge, where the legs of the giggling 'Melia-Hann protruded, but she just crawled through the hedge, and made faces at him from a safe position.

We were both, 'Melia-Hann and I, equally abominable. I did not want to be a gentleman, I wanted to insult the man who had so often insulted me with impunity, and looked at Sophonisba as if she were a thing of no account. That stung the most of all!

"You'll pay for this, both of you!" gasped the insulted man. "My God, you've been insolent to *me!*" There was as much incredulous amaze as rage in his tones. The mere insect had cheeked the omnipotent giant!

"Ta-ta, Mister *Perlite,*" said Amelia, genially waving her hand to him, and then putting her thumb to her nose. "Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Don't let 'em overwork yer now. You put in your word about cruelty to hanimals, the one in the *Bible* spoke——"

"Hush, Amelia!" I said, restraining her.

But she had slipped through my fingers like an eel, and darting off, followed the squire on four legs, like an ass, going through all the antics of the animal she imitated with a realism that would have made her fortune on the stage, and must have driven her victim to distraction. Occasionally she ceased being the ass, and became the squire, puffing ahead full of importance, imitating his wrath, and every physical trait he possessed! I'm ashamed to say I laughed till I cried.

Within an hour Amelia had seen to it that everybody learned that I had " hee'd " at the squire. Sophonisba arrived breathlessly to demand if it was true, and looking at me, said, " It shows you—one *can't* go by appearances ! Why it was ever so smart ! "

CHAPTER XXVII

MY BIRTHDAY

MY rude, and perhaps rather cheap, retort to the squire was everywhere reported, and when possible, improved upon. I was openly congratulated and admired, and lionised to an absurd extent. In fact I lost a deal of my shyness, and became in danger of losing my head!

Certainly the heights of fame are giddy.

It is hateful to have to confess that I rather liked it than otherwise. Nobody had ever made much of me before; and now nobody could make too much of me. It gave me a better conceit of myself—so to speak—and I think conceit is the most delicious possession in the world. The conceited person is always perfectly happy, he knows for a fact that the world revolves round him.

When I went down the village street, the people came to gaze admiringly after me, and if a stranger should by chance be present, I was pointed out as "him what hee'd at squire."

I think, however, it was Angus and Dorothea who took the greatest delight and pride in my exploit.

The emotion of Angus went beyond words. He wrung my hand in silence, and when he could command his voice, told me a new funny story, and firmly in-

sisted that he, and he alone, would do the weeding for a week. We neither of us like weeding—digging being a perfect passion with both—and I have to divide it very fairly—almost to a weed.

Dorothea said she would never have thought it, never, but it just showed you—you never knew a man till you were married to him, and even then, you often did not know him *really* well! She showered all my favourite dishes on me, and I rather overdid it.

I was still suffering from the aftermath of my orgy, when my birthday galloped after and overtook me.

After thirty, birthdays don't come, they make a grab at you every few weeks or so, and you seem to be getting older every minute! Time's aeroplane never breaks down; it is flying towards us all the while, pausing neither for wind nor tide.

Yesterday I was forty, and that was bad. To-day I am forty-one, and that is worse. It is a big tragedy put in a few words. Next year or so, I shall be fifty, and then sixty, and then—but no—I *won't* think of it. Perhaps I shall never be seventy; perhaps I shall merely be dead.

I have always remembered my own birthdays out of sheer perversity, just because there was nobody else to remember them, or be in the least interested I was having a birthday, or a little sorry that I was getting so old. Nobody has ever wished me many happy returns, and equally of course, I have never had a birthday-present. Sometimes it is quite funny to think of all the things I have never had—there are so many of them.

I made up a perfectly idiotic plan in which I presented Dorothea with a sovereign, and asked her to buy me a

birthday-present, and give it me at dinner in tissue-paper and red sealing-wax.

James always chooses his own dinner, and everybody drinks his health in champagne and eats too much, and Pansy says :

" *All* birthdays are meant to be days of rejoicing."

Therefore I was perfectly resolved to have a day of rejoicing, and be very, very happy. Dorothea should be told at breakfast, and wish me ever so many returns, and Angus, as behoved a perfect gentleman, would allow me to do no weeding on that day, and tell me funny stories, while Sophonisba——

But what was the use of bringing Sophonisba into it, when my sole object was to conceal from her the fact that I was a year older ?

I started badly by waking up very " livery," and finding, that although my breakfast was ready, there was no Dorothea. She was not in the housekeeper's room either, and to add to my growing irritation, I discovered I had put a half-penny instead of a sovereign in my pocket. I could not ask her to buy me a birthday present with her love and a half-penny—though I think the love of such as Dorothea would go a long way.

Scattered about the room was a quantity of sewing left in some confusion, which was not like orderly Dorothea. One garment I caught sight of, struck me as curiously inadequate for the tall proportions of my pretty housekeeper.

Luncheon was ready for me after a vexed morning spent in the garden in a vain search for Angus. Dorothea was still invisible.

After lunch I caught him as he was running excitedly out of the house, and asked him for a funny story.

He said he did not feel like funny stories, and went on running.

I went to the little gate, my heart hot with rage and bitterness, but the sight of Sophonisba coming down the road soothed me.

She at once asked me what was wrong.

"Dorothea," I answered gloomily, "I can't find her anywhere."

Sophonisba bent to tie her shoe-lace.

I begged her to allow me, but there was practically nothing left of the shoe-lace but knots. "I didn't think she'd behave like that on my birthday," I added, and perhaps my voice was rather bitter.

Sophonisba, who goes her lovely pink for nothing, went very pink now, and stared, and said, "*Oh*," in a startled sort of way. Then in a rush she asked me the dreaded question.

"Your birthday? Really? How jolly! How old are you?"

"Forty," I began aghast, but had the grace to add—if sullenly—"one."

"How nice!" she said absently, and hurried away.

"Nice!" I echoed to myself with a sigh. She had taken no real interest in my birthday; she had not troubled to wish me any returns, probably she didn't care whether I had them or not. I was obviously already so patriarchal in her eyes, that a year or two one way or the other could make no difference.

I went back to the house for tea, determined to have it out with Dorothea, who had never disappointed me before; but I met Angus carrying the tray into the woods, "Dorothea said she thought you'd enjoy a picnic, sir," he said in a jerky voice. His knees seemed

jerky too, and as he was putting the tray down they crumpled up under him, and lots of the things were smashed. He cursed the broken crockery with the most frightful language, and after he had kicked the fragments, abruptly disappeared.

I drank my birthday tea out of a cracked cup, and picked pieces of china out of the muffins.

If I returned to dress for dinner in a rage, I maintain it was a dignified rage. I simply wouldn't mention my birthday to Dorothea—nothing would persuade me to mention it to a soul.

However, she was still absent. A young woman whom I had never seen before, and trust I never shall again, slid in with a red and excited face, and whenever I tried to enquire as to the whereabouts of Dorothea, slid out again with incoherent exclamations, and a very coherent giggle.

I was too angry to eat, and retired to my study like a bear with a sore head. I was thankful to think I had at least one friend left in the world—my old cherished meerschaum.

By caring for it most tenderly, I had kept it for fifteen years, and only smoked it on very special occasions, and since a birthday—if a ruined birthday—was a special occasion, I got it out now.

It slipped through my fingers on to the floor, and deliberately, and of evil intent, broke itself!

I sat for hours staring at the fragments, and then I rang and commanded that Angus should at once be sent to me.

He burst into the room in the most excitable and disrespectful fashion. "Oh, sir," he began, "so you've heard, sir——"

"Is Dorothea having a holiday?" I demanded sharply. I had urged this course on her several times, and it seemed the only possible solution.

Angus fell to scratching his head.

"Why aren't you taking one too?" I demanded. "Why wasn't I told?"

"Dorothea, sir, she give her orders as how you wasn't to be put about, nor know nothing till it was all over, sir——"

"Which didn't prevent her having it on my birthday," I said icily.

"I'm very sorry, we didn't know anything about that—it's—it's a little darter, sir."

"*What* is?" I asked staring.

He grinned and shuffled, "Dorothea's baby, sir," he said sheepishly.

I uttered a stifled exclamation. What a fool I had been—what a selfish, peevish fool, and how exactly like me it all was!

"The doctor said he'd never seed such a baby, sir," observed Angus in a detached manner.

"The medical profession is hedged about by etiquette," I returned. "Possibly they cannot pass their exams without taking an oath to say that sort of thing of *all* babies."

It was my birthday, but I had received neither good wishes nor a present. I had, indeed, been thrust entirely into the background. Angus, who had been born in mid-winter, was the man of the hour. Merely one of life's little ironies!

He hung about fidgetting. I knew the vain conceited fellow was waiting for my good wishes and congratulations.

" Not like they says it of Dorothea's baby, sir," he returned firmly, " you being nobbut a bachelor——"

The blood flew to my head. To have one's worst disability, and most bitter regret, thrown in one's teeth like that ! I reminded him rather sharply that scarce a year back he had been " nobbut a bachelor ! " himself.

He said there were bachelors *and* bachelors. I doubt whether a steam-roller going over him could have crushed Angus in that hour.

" You're not the only man in the world with a wife and baby ! " I exclaimed exasperated.

" No, sir, but I'm the only man in the world that has Dorothea for his wife, and Dorothea's baby for his darter."

This was an unanswerable argument.

" If it had been a boy," I said resentfully, " it could have helped with the weeding——"

" But, sir——"

" Don't gape at me like a bilious chicken, Angus ! " I commanded.

" I'm sorry, sir, but it's been a very upsettin' day, very."

" It has ! " I agreed grimly.

Here Satan took playful hold of my trousers, and I kicked him to the other end of the room. He sat up and stared at me with the most astonished expression I had ever seen on a dog in my life.

I felt better after that.

I made it up with Angus, shook his hand, warmly congratulated him, and gave him a message for Dorothea. I said, that if they would get a proxy for the christening I should be delighted to be godfather.

Angus was much gratified at the idea. He said it

was the sort of baby to do me credit, and most unusual in every way. "It do seem that strange, sir," he added, "to see Dorothea's lovely blue eyes alookin' at me out of such a teeny, weeny face!"

"Just so!" I said with quite a Pansy-snort.

Then he went to sit with his wife and child, leaving me with a broken pipe and a disgusted dog. In the end, however, Satan yielded to the blandishments of sugar, and came and forgave me very nicely.

All the same it seemed a little hard. Why should men who gardened have everything, and men who paid them—and weeded fair—nothing?

If it was a silly question to ask, it was an impossible one to answer.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I AM INTRODUCED TO DOROTHEA'S BABY

AFTER that he was continually trying to describe Dorothea's baby to me. He said that though only very few people had seen it so far, yet those few had been specially experienced and clever people, and they had all at once exclaimed that never had there been, or could be, such a baby.

"It's a living miracle, that's what it is, sir," said Angus solemnly.

"Quite so, Angus," I agreed politely, trying to conceal my boredom, and not only my boredom, but my aversion.

"And then her hair, like gold, sir!"

"I think it sounds very nice indeed," I said. I imagined that it sounded nicer than it looked.

I suppose I did not sound as enthusiastic as I tried to, for Angus looked at me, and said quickly, "It won't make no difference to you, sir, in any way; me an' Dorothea will see to that. You shan't as much as catch sight of it, and in a fortnight Dorothea will be about again, bless her heart!"

"By the by," I asked, "could you not put a gate or something at the top of your stairs to save the baby falling down?"

What I secretly meant, however, was to prevent the

baby crawling down the stairs, and taking an interest in my quarters and me. I wanted to feel it was safe where it was.

"Very good, sir," he replied after rather a long pause, "I will see to it." He is a very handy carpenter.

At the end of the fortnight, Dorothea appeared one morning at breakfast as if nothing had happened, and I said good-morning to her with delight. She looked prettier than ever, I thought, and extraordinarily happy.

I asked after the health of the baby, though with some timidity. I knew there was a lot of etiquette about babies, and was afraid that if I affected an interest in it, I should be asked to hold it or something.

"I will have the nurseries furnished for it," I said.

"Indeed, sir, I never heard of such a thing! Those two big rooms you made us have upstairs, is more than ample in every way! The nurseries, sir, please God! will have their proper use some day, and the sooner the better, and if my baby can grow up to be maid to your young ladies, sir, it will be a proud day for me an' Angus."

"I'm afraid your baby will have to go as maid somewhere else," I said, trying to laugh. "Old bachelors' households aren't much use to them, I fear."

"Every man has been a bachelor onst, sir, but he needn't go on persistin' of his error."

"He has to have help to depart from the error of his ways," I sighed.

"And many are ready," cried Dorothea," but there, sir, heaven helps them as helps themselves, and don't you forget it!"

I did not see any chance of helping myself, but said no more.

Sophonisba, who adores all babies in a blind fashion, was always asking me after Dorothea's, and demanding if I had seen it.

I used to have to make a lot of excuses.

"You take no interest," she accused me, "and the prettiest baby in Hill Land in your house! It's too bad! Do you know it's got blue eyes just like Dorothea's?"

"How can you tell?" I asked astonished. "It's not three weeks old. It won't have them open yet."

Sophonisba laughed.

Ever since Dorothea's baby had taken up its abode beneath my roof, I was continually making myself ridiculous before Sophonisba.

"Human babies open them at once, and Dorothea's baby's are *very* wide open indeed, I can tell you!"

I stared at her stupefied, and I think she thought I was still unconvinced. She came inside my gate, and shook her finger at me, "Come along at once," she commanded, "I am going to *show* you Dorothea's baby."

I almost went down on my knees to beg her not to, but she was inexorable. I followed meekly—a lamb to the slaughter!

She told me to go into the library and wait. So I went into the library and waited. Usually I love to do what Sophonisba tells me, but this, I must own, was an exception to the rule.

I felt myself go red and pale by turns. Probably Sophonisba would order me to hold it. And how was I to refuse Sophonisba?

Presently she came in with a long bundle-thing, and sat down on a chair, holding the bundle very tenderly. I had never seen her more in her element.

"Come and look, Mr. Delland," she said.

I approached miserably. At a safe distance away I stood still.

"You can't see properly from there," said Sophonisba.

"Yes I can," I returned. I had no wish to see properly.

"Perhaps you think babies bite?" said Sophonisba.

I *had* heard their teeth, like the needle-teeth of puppies, were very sharp, and that sometimes they did, but all I said was, "Oh, no, at least nothing to speak of. Their teeth are very tiny, aren't they?"

"So tiny you can't see 'em quite at first," said Sophonisba. Then she began to talk baby talk to Dorothea's baby, saying all manner of things and calling it "the creature now!" I watched fascinated, but I did not approach any closer.

"Now come along, Mr. Delland. Stand here."

She pointed to a spot on the carpet very close indeed, and I went and stood on it. I decided, however, to keep my eyes shut, and admire the baby like that. I could say how lovely it was, and what a success and all that, so much easier that way.

"Isn't it a precious pet now?" demanded Sophonisba.

"*Rather!*" I exclaimed with tremendous enthusiasm.

Then she looked up and caught me with my eyes shut.

I had not guessed Sophonisba could be so cross or so unkind. She gave me "a talking to," then she told me to look at the baby at once, and this time I looked. I was determined to stand anything, and somehow conceal my shock and loathing.

I got the surprise of my life!

Two big, bright, blue eyes were staring up at me in the most interested and intelligent fashion. It was ever so much bigger than 'Melia-Hann's, and had a lovely skin, and yellow fluff like a chicken's. It was just a miniature Dorothea, and the prettiest little creature I had seen in my life !

" There ! " exclaimed Sophonisba triumphantly, " What did I tell you ? What did you expect ? "

" I—I thought it would be like Amelia's," I faltered. " I thought they must be all like that at the very beginning."

" Good gracious ! You saw that terrible monstrosity ! I had no idea ! Of course I understand everything now. That was the most frightful baby that ever was, and this is the loveliest. Shake hands."

I took up the tiny, flower-like hand of Dorothea's baby very gently, and tenacious fingers closed round my thumb. She seemed to understand who I was perfectly, and all about Sophonisba. It made things feel very odd.

" I—I think I rather like babies after all," I gasped, " not just in the abstract, I mean."

Sophonisba did not answer. She was too busy kissing the baby all over, and never had I seen her look so lovely. There was something about her that made me long for her more than ever. I loved her with an intolerable ache, and its gnawing hopelessness was almost more than I could bear.

Some day a child with honey-coloured eyes and hair, lovelier even than Dorothea's, would smile up at her ; but I should have neither part nor lot in it. It would be all Sophonisba's and some shadowy husband's my evil, jealous heart already hated.

"You like babies?" I said miserably.

"*Like* them!" Her whole face lighted up; indeed, she was very wonderful in that moment—my Sophonisba who would never be mine.

Then suddenly the light went out of her face, and she sighed despondently. "Not much use *me* likin' them," she said, rather bitterly. "I must take her back to her mother!" It struck me babies must be rather heavy for Sophonisba to seem so weary.

"Yes, take her back," I said, relieved.

It had been rather like a sword in my heart—to see Sophonisba hanging so enraptured over a baby. The menace of the future spoke in it. When that day came I should be shut out in the outer darkness. There are two to whom a third is but an annoyance, but there is a trinity which bars out all the world.

"If only I wasn't different. I don't think it's quite fair—me bein' what I am!" I heard Sophonisba murmur resentfully to herself, "and lots only think them nuisances!"

"Nuisances?" I echoed.

She went pink. "Oh, did you hear? I was just muttering to myself. Don't you think Dorothea is a very lucky woman?"

"I think Angus is a very lucky man," I returned.

"Well, that comes to the same thing, doesn't it?" demanded Sophonisba. "Can I tell Dorothea how much you admired the baby?"

"Please do."

Dorothea was very delighted at my appreciation, and the present I bought for my godchild. After that I often went into the housekeeper's room to have a look at the baby, who would smile at me in the friendliest

fashion, and knew perfectly well—we all could see—that I was its godfather. I felt very elated at being a godfather, and rather less of an old bachelor. It seemed a sort of advance by proxy so to speak.

When it got to crawling about—I found they didn't crawl just at once—it would wander into the library, and play with me contentedly for hours. I think I was quite as proud of it as Angus, who sometimes seemed a trifle jealous of its fondness for my society.

"It's your watch, sir," he once said to me, and next time I saw him he had a watch to rival mine.

When Angus and Dorothea didn't want the baby for their own use, they would ask me to "mind" it, and the baby entered into the conspiracy and allowed me to pretend I was "minding" it. As a matter of fact, it was really rather the other way round.

I was more than ever grateful to Dorothea, as you can suppose.

After "mum-mum" and "dad," the very first word the child used was "Ell-Ell," which was, of course, me. It would sit for hours while Angus and I gardened, keeping its bright blue eyes upon us, and unless we were wary, endeavour to do itself fatal injury with some of the tools.

If we were not careful, it would also crawl away to some distance and probably try and eat worms. Our gardening did not progress as once it had done. We were mostly taking things out of the child's mouth, and once we found it trying to swallow a whole stick of rhubarb, and almost black in the face. In fact, the things it tried to eat shocked and frightened me. It seemed always hungry, and I came to the awful con-

clusion that Dorothea—owing to lack of practice and experience—starved it.

One day, when it had tried to dispose of a baby frog in this wise, and screamed most terribly when bereft of it, I felt it was my duty to have it out with Dorothea.

I asked her on what she was feeding the child.

To my horror I discovered that the poor mite had nothing but milky things in bottles, nasty sloppy food that makes you feel hungrier than ever after it. I remonstrated with her, though gently.

"But Dorothea, it eats worms and frogs, and cabbages, and coal, and oh, hundreds of things! I'm afraid it doesn't get quite enough to eat!"

Dorothea only laughed, and pointed out how fat it was.

But I was determined to put a stop to this deplorable state of affairs, and went myself to the butcher's, and told him to send up regularly something suitable for a young baby.

He dived behind the counter, and came up red and gasping, and asked me what kind of baby.

I told him it was the crawling kind, had four teeth, and ate worms, and he said he would see to it. I saw him talking to Dorothea at the side door next day, telling her a funny story seemingly, for both were laughing.

It is odd how even the best of women disregard the claims of the inner man and are rather apt to underdo it.

You cannot think how happy it made me to know that Dorothea's baby had proper food each day, and didn't have to depend on anything so horrid as the stuff put up in bottles for the consumption of helpless infants.

CHAPTER XXIX

I AM GENEROUSLY FORGIVEN

I DO not know if you will remember that about a year ago the squire and I had rather an unpleasant little affair over my gate, and that I proved myself the more unpleasant of the two, and was less ashamed than I should have been.

Since then I had merely ceased to exist in the eyes of the Hall. Pollyt never saw me when I was coming, and the fashionable wife cut me dead.

I am ready to admit that, after thoughtful reflection of my own conduct, I found it unpardonable, and hardly expected they would ever see it in any other light. I made one or two attempts at a better understanding, and was severely snubbed for my pains; indeed, on the last occasion, viewing me from the drawing-room window as I walked nervously up his steps, the squire's eyes had said quite plainly, "What *can* that insect want with ME?" and his loud "Not at home" reached me—as he, perhaps, intended—in the hall.

Consequently the other day, when he stopped me of his own accord, my surprise can better be imagined than described! He nodded, as if our relations had always been of the most cordial, and I was quick to take the hint and nod back in the same manner.

"Haw Delland——" he began. Then he flushed, corrected himself quickly, and started again, "Well, Delland," he demanded genially, "and how goes it, eh?"

I could see he had trained himself to use "eh" instead of "haw."

I replied that I was very fit, and asked after the health of the fashionable wife, who had cut me quite unmistakably the day before.

It seemed to interest him no more than it interested me. He did not even respond to my enquiry, but instead said laughingly, "Not married yet, eh?"

"No," I said.

"Well, well, there's nothing like a free life, and a full purse. You're a lucky dog, Delland, and no mistake! No responsibilities, no domestic affairs."

I agreed that I was lucky.

He turned to go, then seemed to recollect something. "Oh, by the by, you remember my niece? I think you met her a few times last time she stayed here?"

"Miss Pollyt!" I said eagerly, "of course! I cannot tell you how I missed the little chats we used to have! She is coming at last to stay again? How delightful!"

The squire stared at me as if I was a puzzle, "Er—no," he said. "The fact is . . . I dare say I have it on me . . ." Casually he fished a portion of a newspaper out of his pocket.

"Her last book was a great achievement," I said. I wanted to tell her how much I liked it, even though I had found a deep undercurrent of sadness in it. It had bubbled and sparkled on the surface, but beneath there had lain something I could not analyse, some-

thing almost painful. But it had been a good book—even a great book.

"Oh, her public will have to give her a long holiday now," he said. "She is going to be married."

"Really!" I exclaimed, for somehow the news was a great surprise to me. "I hope he's worthy of her, that he will make her happy. He is an extraordinarily fortunate man."

Again Pollyt stared at me in the rather bewildered fashion he has, "Oh, quite a charming fellow," he said. "Most suitable in every way! Let me see, here's the thing, I think."

He put a page from a Society paper in my hand. It contained photographs of prospective bride and bridegroom, and all about them. "The well-known authoress, the beautiful Miss Pollyt, niece of Mr. Pollyt of Hill Land, who belongs to one of the oldest families in Great Britain. The bridegroom, the Honourable Percy Masinbread, eldest son of Lord Withins, at one time in the Guards, but now talking of standing for Withins in the Unionist interest."

"What libels!" I exclaimed indignantly, as I gazed at the two photographs, for I knew Miss Pollyt would never marry a man who at the best could only be described as negative—or have become the slightly cynical and hardened beauty that her own photograph represented.

"What *do* you mean! It's excellent of Masinbread."

I was shocked to hear it.

"And Marcia's was taken by the first firm in town, look at the distinction of it, the elegance of the poise!"

"Miss Pollyt was never just a fashionable woman

of the world," I exclaimed hotly. "She was a great deal more than that. Here she is just a professional beauty, and not half beautiful enough! It's disgusting, an utter libel!"

It was indeed a hateful photograph. The almost bitter, sneering, and certainly most unhappy woman, had nothing in common with the Marcia I had known —never could have anything in common! It was the future Lady Withins that smiled cynically back at me; it was not warm-hearted, talented, happy-souled Marcia! It was an elegant doll wearing a mask.

"Tut! Tut!" said Pollyt, but I think he was pleased. "Of course she is as beautiful as ever—more polished, more witty, smarter! Yes, Masinbread is very fortunate; it appears he has wanted it for a long time, and of course his family too; but Marcia would only hear of it lately. A queer girl in many ways, for he's one of the most eligible of parties, and greatly sought after. I must say this marriage takes a great weight off my mind. I was afraid of the romantic strain in Marcia, that she might perhaps take up with some low feller, some complete nobody, you know."

I could not imagine Miss Pollyt acknowledging the existence of a "low feller." Whatever she might be now, she had been the most fastidious of women.

"There could be no danger of that," I said emphatically.

He reddened as he does when contradicted. "Of course she would never have thought of it *really*," he said angrily, "but he might think she was willing and all that."

"He would have to be rather blind," I said.

"Possibly he is," snorted Pollyt, "or possibly he's

merely the most cunning, sly, sarcastic beggar I ever struck." His face was purple.

"Miss Pollyt would not have known a man like that," I said.

"Perhaps not, perhaps not! Any way, all's turned out for the best, and I'm sure I bear no ill-will to anybody!"

I saw he was alluding to the gate episode, and wished me to understand I was handsomely forgiven.

"And I bear none either," I said quickly, "though it used to seem a little pointed at times."

He swallowed, and seemed to conquer an outburst with an effort. "Well, well, bygones are bygones, and that's enough of it! Why don't *you* follow Marcia's example and get married? She's shown you the way, hasn't she, both of you seemingly being hard to please. These vicarage girls now? Charming young persons, I am told, and not bad-looking for their position. So suitable in every way, and such a relief, ha, ha! The 'quality of mercy is not strained,' and it almost would be a mercy, an act of charity—charity after all begins in Hill Land, does it not? I see the youngest has returned from her absurd fortnight—with the usual result! What else they expect, I can't see. Think of the competition, and really beautiful Society girls trained to it! A great impertinence attempting it at all, I consider. The poor duchess—one of my oldest friends—think of her feelings! Four of them, and out of sheer good-nature! She must be thankful the ordeal is at an end. Of course she will miss out the Soapy one!"

He eyed me with something akin to malice.

I went most frightfully red. "*Why?*" I demanded

aggressively. Why was Sophonisba to be deprived of her social success? What right had he to allude to her as "the Soapy one." Why shouldn't she have the world and its gilded youth at her feet if she chose? Perhaps the gallant knight might be among them, though I could not help thinking that had he been really gallant he would have found out Sophonisba long ago.

"Because one can't make bricks without straw," said the squire, turning away laughing, "and there is a limit, my dear fellow, there is really!"

That night I wrote to Marcia and congratulated her, or rather wished her happiness, and ordered a wedding-present for her that I knew she would like. "I have seen the photograph of your fiancé," I wrote, "and feel sure it does not do him justice, and yours was an abomination to the eyes of your friends. But if you will tell me he was the hundredth, and not one of the ninety-nine, I will know that all is for the best."

Her reply puzzled me. "Dear Mr. Delland," she began, "Of course everything is for the best. Is not my capture a very, very big fish, for which much bait has been cast in vain? Is he not rich? Has he not rank? Is he not yet young enough to learn? What more could any sensible woman desire? I have become sensible since you knew me—sometimes it is best. I shall not have to work any harder than I wish. I shall be able to be one of the butterflies, and go laughing through life. I shall not bother about feeling; I shall only bother about playing. I am going to play most terribly hard."

I thought of the bridegroom. How was he ever to be a suitable playfellow for Marcia Pollyt? And she

had always said that too much play was only another way of spelling damnation. I read on, feeling somehow far from happy about the letter's beautiful, brilliant writer.

"How ungallant to complain of my fashionable photograph," she went on. "Why I paid pounds and *pounds* to be made a credit to the noble house of Withins, and almost thought I had succeeded, till your words dashed my hopes! And it is so very like; you see, you only knew me in the country having a very, very happy holiday, and full of hopes for the future; but when the future closes down on you, there is nothing further to hope for, is there, and only the present to live for? I was living for the present when I had my photograph taken, and perhaps that is why you miss my old self. Why do you ask so many questions? Was it not you who swore there would be the hundredth, you who made so sure—that I was sure too? Did you not even promise it, O false friend? And then, when I came back here, I found there were but the ninety and nine after all—and made the best of that! So I am going to be a Society beauty and success, and very, very happy, and very, very gay!"

So the letter ended, leaving me at least far from gay. She had said nothing of it, she never would—she would not break her heart, she would merely be gay instead; but I knew as well as if she had told me, that some man—fool or scoundrel, which or both, it mattered little—had failed Marcia Pollyt, and spoiled her life.

Instead of marriage, she was merely making "a good match."

CHAPTER XXX

SOPHONISBA AND HER BOMBSHELL

I SHALL never forget the expression Sophonisba wore when she came round this morning, and I hope I shall never see her look so miserable again.

"I'm in the soup," were her first words.

I have come to understand—as I have always loved, even when not quite understanding—the quaint original language of Sophonisba. I think it is right that one so rare should have a tongue of her own.

I understood she was in trouble. I wondered if anybody was dead, and if so, who.

I took her hand. "I hope it isn't catching?" I said anxiously.

"Oh, it's nothing like that," she returned. "Nobody's hopped it! It's this. Read it!"

She fished a letter out of her pocket, and handed it to me. She had the air of a tragedy queen, and I could not help thinking what a great and wonderful and beautiful actress she would have made.

Of course I knew her father would oppose such an idea. He would prefer Sophonisba the simple village maid to another Ellen Terry. But was it fair to Sophonisba?

But then they never thought about *that!* Nobody

thought about that but me. They just let the most wonderful girl in the world be wasted!

"Hurry up and read the letter!" commanded Sophonisba.

It was gaudily ornamented with a coronet, which put me off it at once, and the handwriting was abominable. I *knew* it was from the duchess, and that I was going to lose Sophonisba, and wasn't as glad she was going to have her chance at last, as I ought to have been. In fact, I was shocked at my own jealous resentment. They had tried to put the duchess off about having Sophonisba, because Sophonisba was needed as "a second curate," but it was not likely the duchess was going to forego her pound of flesh, and the great credit of showing off the flower of the flock.

Whether it was the sort of letter suitable or usual to a duchess I am not in a position to say; but it certainly was not a letter suitable to a lady.

"Dear Mary (it began),

"Having taken four through the mill, why should I be denied the fifth, and a consciousness of duty thoroughly done? I said 'all' in the years when there were *none,* and I say all now when there are *five,* therefore please send Soapy to me for the usual fortnight. There is just time to fit it in before Ascot. I am indeed fortunate in having merely two sons suitably married, for it seems to me the lot of mothers is, trying either to prevent their sons marrying into the chorus, or anybody at all; or getting their daughters married to *anything.*

"I've heard enough about Soapy being different—whatever that may mean—but I presume the child

has two arms, two eyes, and two legs, is not devoid of nose or tongue, and hasn't a hump ?

" Beauty is all very well in its way. In that line your four girls were all I could desire ; unfortunately, there didn't seem much *nous* at the back of it. Culture and good breeding aren't ' in ' just now, but your girls ran them for all they were worth. They hadn't the sense to drop culture and take up another *rôle* ; they just hung on to their obsolete ideas, and never said or did one original thing. Originality is the long suit, and personality is another, either make chaperonage a pleasure rather than a duty.

" It seems to me that if a chaperone leads a horse to the water, it's the part of the chaperoned to see that it drinks, but all *your* girls' horses went empty away.

" That some of them were not horses, but merely donkeys is neither here nor there ; they at least *believed* themselves to belong to the nobler species.

" I am sorry there has been no good news to report. Because we were once great friends and had no secrets from each other, I may say frankly, that I consider that a woman so devoid of self-respect and policy, as to produce five daughters in an age like this, deserves all she gets and *more.* Indeed, I think she should be taken up for a nuisance. Of course if she is rich, and they are all fairly good-looking, and not *too* foolish, it's a lesser evil. One mercy, your girls aren't clever, so there's hope for them yet ! I wish I could have lightened the burden a little, but they simply wouldn't go off, and there you have it brutally stated.

" Clergymen's daughters are all right as far as they go ; the trouble is they don't go far enough. This is

the day of the high-kicker and the fast-goer, and not too much of the mealy-mouth. Get as close as possible to the language and antics of the chorus, if you want to make a big match. You can *then* afford to become a lady on marriage. Your daughters are gentlewomen, and it's a terrible disability these days. One finds such people—elderly spinsters—in the select tours personally conducted by clergymen.

" What one wants is something *different*, even to the point of being a freak. That Soapy is different is the one ray of hope I've got left. I'm sure if a girl always walked on her hands instead of her feet, she would be overwhelmed at once. Soapy may be sharp, may strike a *rôle*, a pose, one never knows ! Stranger things *have* happened ! She will have exactly the same chances as the others, and maybe *one* of your daughters will get into the *Morning Post*. You used to take all the school prizes. Surely you can't, and with your income, have brought *five* fools into the world ! If so, God help you—*I* can't.

" Ever your affectionate friend,

" JESSICA."

Everything annoyed me about the letter, but most of all the casual way the duchess spoke of Sophonisba, and called her Soapy.

" A nice sort of duchess," I said hotly, " she ought to be shot ! Such a rude letter ! "

" Personally, I agree with her," said Sophonisba gloomily, and then with a burst added, " what a silly ass I shall look—husband-huntin' ! "

" Oh, Sophonisba, you mean being *hunted* by would-be husbands ! " I sighed, for Sophonisba often made

slight slips of this nature, and the picture sent the blood to my face. I saw my honey surrounded by bees. The duchess would tell her to accept one, and not trouble much about his character; all that would matter to her would be his wealth and his rank. She would marry my poor darling to another duke.

"I expect you'll marry a duke," I said unhappily.

"Oh, yes," said Sophonisba, "you can bet on that!"

"Would you do it if he wasn't quite a nice duke?" I faltered; for all her suitors could not be nice.

"Supposin', just *supposin'*, there was somethin' like that," she said, "an' I didn't like him, I wouldn't, no, not if I was starvin', an' all they'd say at home! It would make me sick, an' I'd go without, and be an old maid—which I shall be anyway——, but if I liked him, I'd marry him, even if he was a duke, though I should hate it, and look an awful ass, and would much rather he was a tramp! But there won't be either a duke or a tramp. We don't live in fairy tales, worse luck."

"Worse luck indeed!" I echoed, for if we lived in fairyland, then Sophonisba would have been the beauty, and though I should have been only the beast, yet she would have married me just the same, and we should have dwelt in fairyland together.

"Moss End always makes me think of fairyland," she said dreamily, "and you know your toadstools always grow in a magic ring in the woods. There must be somethin' in it!"

"I wish there was a prince in it for you, Sophonisba," I said longingly, "some one young and handsome, and full of all good gifts."

"Young men are so—so young," objected Sophonisba. "They think more of whether to grow a moustache or not, than they do of you; and then they are always in and out of love."

"I didn't mean as young as that, just the right age," I said quickly, and sighed.

Sophonisba buttoned her shabby shoe. "I think it's the heart, and not anything else that tells the age," she said. "People could be ever so young if they always thought nice things, and forgot about silly figures on their birthdays."

"I wish I could think so too," I sighed.

"How young would you be then?" asked Sophonisba.

"What age do you like a man to be?" I returned eagerly, "because I would be that age, Sophonisba.

"I shouldn't wonder if you did manage to be it!" she answered, going pink.

"If only the age of miracles was not past!"

"How can people be sure they are past—if they've never tried to work even a little one!"

"The trouble is that I should want to work such a dreadfully big one!" I groaned.

Sophonisba rested her elbows on my gate, and her chin in her hands. Her eyes had a lovely far-away expression.

"If you tried to make a mole-hill, I expect nothing would rise from the ground at all," she said thoughtfully, "but who knows that if you tried for a mountain, you might not make a mole!"

"But if you tried for heaven itself, Sophonisba, what then? What of the fate of Prometheus?"

"I never heard of him," said Sophonisba, giving

herself a little shake, "and what rot we are talking, aren't we?"

"You won't give a thought to Moss End when you find the world at your feet," I said gloomily, "and you will only have to choose out of a multitude of princes."

"Exactly," said Sophonisba, "I shall be trippin' over them most of the time!" She shot out her foot almost viciously, "Rather a useful sort of hoof to tread on hearts! The others wouldn't have trod, they would have picked up the heart very carefully for fear it might break or slip out of their hands—but naturally I have only to be seen to be appreciated!"

"*Naturally*," I agreed.

"It'll be like ninepins, won't it? Me knockin' down these hearts all the time, and others setting themselves up to meet the same fate! Quite funny! Why don't you come up and *see* me do it! You might see me doin' the Society-biz like an elephant walking on to a too-small tub! Then I've got to be presented! I shall probably bump into the King or Queen, or turn a summersault tryin' to get out backwards, and end my days in prison! I shouldn't be surprised *whatever* happened to me so long as it was somethin' awful! And then the duchess has got one of those duchessy sort of noses, long and beaky, the kind that frighten me. Now the noses I like are the sort you needn't have any respect for. They make life less of a burden, I sometimes think."

She sighed heavily.

Then she looked hard at mine.

I thanked heaven that I had a nose nobody could possibly respect.

"Mine," she went on, "is not only not respectable,

but actually contemptible." She gave it a merciless pinch, and then blinked the tears out of her eyes. "The brute! The *beast*!" she exclaimed passionately.

"Do you mean the duchess?" I asked. For I quite agreed with her.

"I meant my nose," she said huffily.

"But what's wrong with it?" I asked astonished. "It's a very nice nose!" And so indeed it is, nothing sharp or long, or beaky about it; but small with a slightly piquant tilt, and beautifully flat. I hate noses that jut out like parrot-beaks.

"What's wrong with father's?" was her rather odd reply.

I did not like to say what was wrong with Mr. Kearness', because I could not remember a single thing that was right with it. It was just flattened straight on to his face as if some one had sat heavily on it in his infancy, and had a sort of tea-spout at the end. It was really rather a ridiculous sort of a nose, but I would not say anything of that sort of Sophonisba. I went very red, and said instead that there was nothing wrong with it.

"Then there's nothing wrong with mine!" said Sophonisba. "Oh, why didn't mother have it pinched?"

"Have Mr. Kearness' nose pinched?" I gasped.

"How silly you are," exclaimed Sophonisba in an exasperated tone. "How could she? It would be his mother that ought to have seen to that! Now, if, when I was a baby, mother had put me somewhere handy for people passin' in an' out, and pinched it herself, and said to everybody, 'Oh, when you are passin', just pinch baby's nose, will you?' things

might have been a *little* better; but I think she just lost her nerve at sight of it, and gave in without a struggle; now if *I*——" she paused suddenly, went pink, and added, "most babies' noses want pinchin'—when they are girls."

"Oh, Sophonisba," I gasped, for the practice sounded most inhuman, and was, I imagined, against the laws of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. "How can you say such a thing? We don't pinch the nose of Dorothea's baby; indeed, I should not allow it!"

"Dorothea's baby has a perfect nose, but think of mine bein' presented to the King; he will laugh, I know he will; however is he going to help it? If it were only my nose, but when all my other things are on the same level; now my mouth——"

"How can you talk like that!" I burst out. "Haven't you a looking-glass? Don't you know you have a most lovely mouth! What do you want more?"

"More of a nose, and less of a mouth, for one thing," she returned, "and feet that were feet you could take into a shoe-shop without blushin' for, an' the people sayin', 'I think, madam, we will be havin' in somethin' that will suit in a day or two,' an' then knowin' they are at the telephone havin' them specially made, an' everybody tryin' to be serious! Think of me in London disgracin' the poor mater with every step I take—as if she hadn't enough to bear with pater an' the parish an' so many at home, an' only me to help! I tell you I've plenty to think of in sermon-time, an' now I've my own frocks to plan out, a thing that's never happened before. Some people dress to make themselves noticeable, and others have to dress to escape bein' seen at all, and that's what I'm tryin' for!

If the duchess don't like it she can lump it, an' send me home—the sooner the better! I shan't have to bother to write home to report progress like the others—they jolly well know there won't *be* any bloomin' progress!"

"Will you write to me instead?" I begged eagerly.

"You don't know my writin' or spellin', or you wouldn't ask."

"That is a sign of distinction, and I should love your letters, if only you would! There's nothing I wouldn't do to have them."

"I'll write, if you'll send me flowers from Moss End to remind me that I'll soon be back," she said in a queer, choked voice. "Even a fortnight in purgatory must come to an end some time!"

"Oh, I should love to," I returned eagerly, "and —and do you think you would wear one now and then?"

"Oh, I shall wear them all always," she cried, pressing her hands together. "If I can hide behind a flower-garden so much the better, and—and——"

She put her handkerchief to her eyes and fled hurriedly. She does not want to go, she is shy and shrinking, my lovely, modest Sophonisba, but when she looks into the eyes of the fairy prince she will be glad she has gone!

And now she really *has* gone, and I could swear the birds have ceased to sing. It is only the thought of her letters that upholds me. I have never had a letter from Sophonisba, and know so well the sort of letters that she, and only she! will write—wonderful, charming letters, full of beauty and the delicate nobility of a great mind and soul.

She has promised to tell me the worst—at least, it

will be the worst for me, but since it will be the best for her, I must not speak of it so—I mean the coming of the knight.

"And will you tell me when you fall in love?" I had ventured to ask.

But her face had flamed at the suggestion, and she shook her head. "Good gracious, not much!" she had exclaimed.

And of course I saw that I had no right to expect it. Who was I to demand a share in a maiden's fair young dream?

CHAPTER XXXI

PANSY PROMISES ME A VISITOR

PANSY appeared the other day full of news and excitement. "I felt I had to tell you myself," she said. "Oh, Edward, what *do* you think! Bella's engaged!"

"But haven't you been expecting it?" I asked.

"*All* engagements are an excitement, whether you've been expecting them or not," she said, "and a great relief to have announced."

I said I hoped the fiancé was nice.

"Of course he's nice, Edward; why, he has two motor-cars and a good income of his own!"

Privately I wondered whether Bella was marrying the motors or the man, but I did not venture to enquire. "She is happy?" was all I dared.

"Radiantly happy, the dear child! It is very touching, Edward, and reminds one of one's own youth!"

"But there weren't motor-cars in those days," I said stupidly.

"Don't try and be sarcastic, Edward."

"I beg your pardon, I wasn't. What would she like for a wedding-present?"

Pansy must have decided what I was to give already, for it rolled off the tip of her tongue at once. She told me of the best place to get it.

"Why do you look so thoughtful?" she asked me suddenly.

"I was wondering what you would have done if he had been poor, but Bella and he had loved each other very much?"

She shut her eyes and shivered, "Oh, Edward, why must you always be supposing such dreadful things! My girls were not brought up like that!"

"But accidents do happen in families."

"Not in mine," said Pansy firmly.

"And you were brought up the same way?"

"Of course."

"But you married James—and James was poor then."

She looked utterly taken aback, and the colour flew to her face. "James was different," she said at length.

Oneself always is, I sometimes think. We are always the exception ourselves! I do not often press things hard with Pansy, but I meant to press this question.

"How different?" I said.

"How dense you are, Edward. It was *us!* Besides," she added triumphantly, "anybody could tell James was not the sort of young man to remain poor. I felt sure he would make money, and he has! So you see."

"Then if you had known he would never have made more than enough to keep body and soul together, you wouldn't have married him?" I persisted doggedly.

She looked all ways save mine. "Not—not unless he had made me," she said a little faintly.

"And you think he would have made you?"

She looked down, a strange and rather beautiful smile swept for an instant across her face, so that she

looked quite young, and much softer and really rather lovely. But she made no reply.

"I doubt it," I said, "for it would not have been really sensible, would it, Pansy?"

"What has—James and I were different," she said again. "Don't be silly, Edward! And he didn't remain poor, and we have helped each other to get on, and have had the right sort and the right amount of children, who are getting on too; so it was the most sensible marriage possible in spite of my mother's——" she stopped suddenly.

"Your mother did not wish it? She said he was poor, that you ought to marry a rich man? Perhaps there was a rich man?"

"Don't ask silly questions, Edward!" returned Pansy, her face very red. "I can't think what's come to you lately, you're so different. I made a very good match, and naturally I expect my daughters to do the same, and they have done so. We did not have attractive poor young men to the house. *All* desperately poor young men are attractive; mostly, I suppose, because they have nothing to lose, and have to make their wit and manners go a long way; and rich young men don't trouble about either—with the exception of Ethel's husband and Bella's fiancé, of course."

I might have known they would also be different. There was one law for Pansy and all connected with her, and another for the rest of the world.

"Then you brush romance aside," I sighed, "unless he brings his cheque-book in his hand?"

She stared at me aghast, "Edward, what has come to you! Surely you haven't fallen in love at last!" She looked at me with horror. "And I have come

down to promise you Tom for his next holidays! The dear boy won't mind the quietness and dullness if his company cheers you up. Edward, have you fallen in love—or think you have?"

I wiped a burning face. "What an idea!" I gasped, laughing in rather a hollow fashion. "*Me!* At my age!"

"I knew it," she gazed at me tragically. "That authoress-person, of course! But she's going to be married. My poor Edward!" she patted my hand. I think she was sorry for the misfortune she had supposed me to be suffering from, but I think she was also a little glad. "My poor boy, how dreadful! And she's to make quite a big match, and you, naturally, are feeling a little sore just at present, but, my dear, it will soon go, and you will be as happy as ever. You were not a suitable pair, but oh, dear, I do hope she won't put your proposal in her next book!"

"I don't think she will do that," I said. What a merciful escape! Pansy did not yet suspect Sophonisba.

"Well, tell me all about her, describe her to me. Perhaps it will make you feel better." She patted my hand again. "You shall certainly have Tom. He will decline all his other invitations. He will soon make you forget all about it, he's such a clever, unusual boy in every way. I don't know any mother with a son like Tom—poor things! But about Miss Pollyt, was she really beautiful?"

"She was indeed," I exclaimed, "a young goddess——"

"Oh, hush, Edward! The goddesses did such things. *All* gods and goddesses were no better than they should

be; that's why they seem about the only thing I remember from my school-days. You don't mean that surely!"

"Oh, no, a—a Cleopatra," I gasped. I rather wanted to laugh. Pansy has such extraordinary ideas.

"You have rather a pernicious taste, I'm afraid, Edward. I can remember about Cleopatra too. A nice sort of person! Still, of course, she lived in a different age, and was very beautiful, and very clever, and we must make allowances, Edward."

"Quite so," I agreed.

"Foolish boys think of their first calf-love as quite Cleopatra-like, and worship her and all that; but it never occurs to them that a real Cleopatra-person would laugh at their worship! So Miss Pollyt was tall and stately and beautiful and clever?"

"All that and more," I said, "for she was a noble woman too."

Then it struck me that I was talking of Miss Pollyt as if she was dead, and corrected myself quickly, "is a very noble woman."

"If she's all you say, and dresses as I have heard she does, she will hardly need to be noble too," said Pansy in a dry sort of way, "*all* high-moral-toned people want well looking into before you take them as read. It may be a cloak, or it may be a disappointment, or it may be genuine, but you may as well know! A woman who is brilliant and beautiful has got her share. She is marrying a peer or something, isn't she?"

I explained.

"The average middle-class doesn't need a Cleopatra for his wife, Edward; he needs a woman who can cook a chop, and keep her head in an emergency."

It seemed to me that marriage became robbed of all its beauty. A wife who would be half her time in the kitchen did not appeal in the least. I wanted a companion, and some one to smile at me across the drawing-room tea-table.

She looked at me sharply. "You have had a lucky escape, and soon you will realise it for yourself! Have you ever heard a funny story about a white elephant? I think a rajah sent it to a city clerk, who tied it to a tree, and had his house pulled down by it, and the palings eaten, and himself greatly disliked by the neighbours. That's what a Cleopatra-wife would be —a white elephant! Edward, be thankful!"

I thought of Sophonisba. Would she be a white elephant? Could a man not live up to her? But though she was so beautiful, and so far above all other women, there was nothing of the white elephant about her. Certainly it had not occurred to me to liken her to Cleopatra. It would not have been to the advantage of Cleopatra.

"Wasn't it funny?" she asked.

"For the clerk or the elephant?" I enquired. "Angus tells me funnier stories than that. Mostly things that have come under his own observation. Nothing escapes his notice. The last time he was in Scotland at a great railway terminus, there was an English lady running up and down the platform, having just alighted from the train, and calling out, 'Oh, I've lost my luggage, I've lost my luggage! I want a porter!' over and over again, and nobody taking the least notice of her. At last, when everybody had been cleared away, and only she was left, still running up and down, crying out, 'Oh, I've lost my

luggage, I've lost my luggage! I want a porter!' a porter strolled leisurely up to her with his hands in his pockets, and said laconically, 'If ye've lost yer luggage, what for d'yer need a porter?'"

"What a disrespectful man! Disgraceful!" gasped Pansy, "but go on—tell me the story!"

"That *is* the story," I answered desperately.

"But you said a funny story! You haven't told me a story, you've only told me about a poor lady losing her luggage, and the disrespect of a Scotch porter! Wasn't he reported? Did she get her luggage?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said feebly. I wished I had not told it. It amused me vastly; but perhaps it was not so funny to others. To each his own humorous point of view—or lack of it!

"James tells me funny stories, and I always laugh," she went on aggrieved.

It dawned upon me that she merely laughed to please James; though I wondered at her laughing even then, knowing some of his rather highly-flavoured specimens.

"I'm sorry," was all I had to say.

"Well, the English porters don't behave like that—cheeking the passengers, and one in such trouble! Of course no dependable woman ever loses her luggage, or gets in the wrong train, but it might have been the company's fault. I suppose the porter was a Socialist, and that was the point."

I changed the subject. "You must see Dorothea's baby," I said; "it's the most wonderful baby that ever was!" And I told her a lot about its wonders.

"Good gracious, Edward, what next! What have old bachelors to do with babies? I hope it's the image of Angus."

"No, of Dorothea, which is far nicer," I said.

"But not so satisfactory, all things considered. I suppose you rave about it to everybody! Oh, Edward, you are very trying! You never seem to think!"

"I think about Dorothea's baby, I assure you," I returned, warmly. "Why, I can nurse it as well as anybody! Ask Dorothea! Ask Angus!"

"Oh, Edward, you must be getting . . . getting odd. I never heard of an old bachelor going on about babies like that——"

"Dorothea's baby is not an ordinary baby at all——" I was beginning indignantly, but she stopped me.

"*All* first babies are wonders and miracles, and the rest of it," she exclaimed impatiently. "I expect it's under, rather than over, the average, as a matter of fact."

But she did not suppose it when she saw it. Even Pansy's breath was taken away. She stayed an hour later to see it have its bath.

I think that that, more than anything else, goes to prove what an absolute wonder Dorothea's baby is!

CHAPTER XXXII

A LETTER FROM SOPHONISBA

THERE is only one thing to console one for the beloved one's absence, and that is her letters. Her letters were the next best thing to Sophonisba, but they were not my dear girl herself.

When she stated that her spelling was not all she could have wished, she libelled herself, for her letters were merely delightful and original, and in quite a short time I could read them easily, and know almost every word.

I have those letters still.

In giving a specimen I am copying it out clearly, and using the average spelling of the average person. It is kinder to the readers of this chronicle—for after all they will be but the average people.

This is the first I got from her, and I think the longest.

" Dear Mr. Delland (it began),

" Thanks awfully for all the books and magazines and chocolates and roses you brought to the train. I ate them all and felt much better at once, though a bit bilious towards the end. I don't like travelling, it's so jerky, but of course I've hardly ever been in a train before, and never for so long a journey. I felt awfully queer when I got out, hating the thought of food and

the duchess and all that, you know ; in fact, I had to clutch at a porter to prevent myself falling flat on my face, and he said in a sort of impatient way, 'In a *minute*, miss, I'm engaged at present ! ' I think he meant with an old lady's luggage, but it sounded awfully odd just at first. You see, I've never been in a big town before, and didn't know the customs or anything.

" When the duchess saw me—my nose was red with trying to keep the tears back, and my hat had fallen on to my shoulder, so I was looking even *my* worst—she said, 'Good Heavens, child ! I never expected anything like this ! ' Of course I knew what she meant, but because I felt so bad in every way, I didn't care, and 'up'd and at her ! ' I said it was all her own fault, that she said I was to come whatever I was, and I'd come, though I jolly well didn't want to ! And I'd take the train back, not minding if it upset me, and thank God for it ! Of course it was awfully rude, but my nerves were all anyhow.

" I thought she'd be furious, for she has the sort of nose I'm afraid of, but she wasn't ; she just laughed ever so, and said it was all right. I'd amuse her anyhow. She seems a bit of a sport. She's frank, but I'm franker, and we hit it off all right.

" The first thing, of course, was to go and have the Presentation dress tried on. She has them ready for us, you know, and we just have to be fitted, and have it sent home. The beastly thing had to be taken in where it should have been out, and let out where it shouldn't—like waists and things. The dressmaker, who is like a duchess herself, only French and grander, kept wringing her hands, and saying, 'Mon Dieu !

Mon Dieu ! ' She cried most of the time. The duchess said it was because she was so sensitive. *She* looked out of the window.

" When I saw myself in the glass, I nearly had a fit. You know a monkey's all right as a monkey ; it's when you dress it up that it becomes awful, and that was how *I* looked ! I know the King and Queen will laugh, and I don't blame them.

" The duchess sent me on to the house first in the electric-brougham, she had to call somewhere and was to follow in a taxi. She told me to ask for what I wanted.

" In the hall was a scrubby-looking little man hanging about and looking awfully bored, and not as if he enjoyed being a butler, and after the squire's he seemed a bit of a come down for a duchess. However, I went up to him at once, because I wanted to seem as to the manner born and all that sort of thing, for the duchess' sake, and said haughtily, ' Have hot water taken up to my room at once, please ! ' And he said it should be done.

" ' And I like the scrubby sort of towels,' I said.

" He told me he'd see to that too.

" ' I think,' I added on second thoughts, ' that after such a long and dirty journey, I'd rather have a warm bath. Will you see to that ? '

" And he bowed and said with a face like a funeral mute's, ' With pleasure, madam.'

" I must say that, though he wasn't much to look at, his manners were most courtly.

" And then the duchess came rushing in—she's a great rusher—and rushed at the butler, and shook his hands, and said, ' My *dear* Templebore, I'm so sorry

to be late! But I do hope you've made yourself perfectly at home, and not been too bored for words!'

"'I haven't been bored in the least,' he said, smiling at me, 'owing to your charming friend.' And then the duchess introduced us, and he wasn't a butler at all, but an earl—though a married one!

"Wasn't it awful?

"When he told the duchess she laughed till she cried, and he laughed and I laughed, and it didn't seem to matter, and I felt as if I had known him always! The real butler came, and I felt as if I ought to apologise for taking the earl for him, for he was such a handsome, genteel-looking person, and though not quite so courtly, vastly superior; and he fetched the duchess' maid and I had my bath and everything I had ordered, and when later the earl asked me if I had found everything to my satisfaction—including the scrubby towels—I said I had; and he bowed and remarked that he was glad to have given satisfaction, for he never could at home, which was one of the many little reasons he hardly ever went there. I asked him what were the others, and he looked at the duchess, who got red, and said, 'Now, don't be silly, Templebore, or I won't allow you to come here either!' But I don't think she really meant it somehow. The duchess and the earl said I was most original, and they wouldn't be a bit surprised if I didn't 'pull it off.' The earl promised he would 'advertise' me fully in all the clubs. He said that with judicious advertisement, anybody could do anything! Then he went away, and when he shook hands, asked me, with a twinkle in his eye, if I had any orders for the morning, and would I have my bath hot or cold? I rather like the

earl, though he seems rather frivolous for the father of a grown-up family, and the grandfather of two boys ; but he explained that he had been married ' straight out of the school-room.'

" The Presentation was very awful ! Of course there were so many nice things and nice people to look at, that I don't think many had time to notice me doing all the wrong things as hard as ever I could. The King blew his nose the moment he saw me ! People said he had a slight cold, but I knew better. He just had to laugh, but was too kind-hearted to let me know, and so pretended he wanted his handkerchief ! Afterwards people came back with us and talked about the Presentation, and there was a very fat man who came too, and laughed at nearly everything I said—especially when there was nothing to laugh at. The duchess seemed very pleased to have him so amused. He seems rather a friend of hers, for I heard them arranging to do lots of things together.

" When I said good-night to her she looked at me very hard, and said, ' You clever child ! You have caught the right pose ! I shouldn't be surprised——' and then stopped suddenly, but went on to say that if you couldn't be an extreme at one end, it was not a bad thing to be an extreme at another, and the middles were the most difficult. I did not understand what she meant, but we seemed to get to like each other a lot. I wish you were up here too " (how I blessed her for that wish !) " because sometimes it's not half bad, and there are lots of things I should enjoy most awfully if you were doing them too, but it's always the fat man."

I was glad he was fat—that man. Digging had

worked wonders with me. I don't say my waist went in—it didn't !—but it didn't go out—and that is always something ! Then the thin spot on the top of my head is far less thin, and my muscles are in excellent condition. I not only feel, but look, and am years younger than when—as an old fogy—I came to Moss End a couple of years ago. I should have greatly liked to have gone to London and to have seen Sophonisba in all her glory, but I simply didn't dare. I should not, of course, be permitted to see Sophonisba. I could imagine the duchess looking down her awful nose at me, putting up long-handled glasses, and saying in quite indescribable tones, "And pray who is your low friend ?"

I do not say the duchess would use these actual words—frank as she was !—only that that is exactly what whatever words she did use would mean. And I should wilt on the spot, and look more than ever ridiculous before Sophonisba.

No, I dare not risk it. I had everything to lose and nothing to gain by going. At Moss End I had at least her letters. To continue with the one I was reading—

"People say the duchess is eccentric," it went on, "that she doesn't care what she says, or who she says it to. Certainly she hasn't any manners ! The other day in the Park we met Mr. Pollyt. He seemed to know the duchess much better than the duchess knew him. He was quite gushing to me, never 'hawing' once, which shows you ! She just walked away, and looked at a flower-bed. The fat man was with us, and he treated the squire as if he was just nobody. It was wonderful. Perhaps he isn't quite as important

in London as in Hill Land, and perhaps that is why he says he prefers Hill Land to any other spot in the world. Before he went he actually shook hands with me ever so politely, and said he must congratulate me on my amazing success. He said the clubs were all talking about it. The sarcastic beast! I'm glad you hee'd at him. Trying to get at me like that! But I just tilted up my chin, and said in a languid, bored manner, 'Success is rather wearying though, isn't it? I don't seem to have a moment to myself!' He went away with his mouth open.

"Then who should I see but Miss Pollyt that was. In a way she looked more beautiful than ever, and much grander, yet in another way it was a different sort of loveliness, and I didn't like it as much. She was smiling a lot, but her eyes looked awfully tired, and had lost their merry look, but I dare say merry looks aren't fashionable, and she was simply frightfully fashionable. Her husband was with her. I thought he looked like a sheep more than anything, and he kept looking at his wife as if she was a turnip, and he doted on her. She looked quite startled when she saw me, and flushed, but stopped for a moment. She asked after you and everybody, and wondered why you weren't up too. Then she looked hard at the fat man, who went frightfully red, and began to stammer out small talk. I think he must have been in love with her himself. Well, I must end now, for I have to go out and see the pictures again with the fat man, who hardly lets you see anybody but him, he's so dreadful; but in hot weather he makes a shade. I don't suppose there'll be one picture as nice as yours. How is the garden and Dorothea's baby, and everybody? How I

wish I could see for myself! It's only three days, but it feels like a lifetime, and so much seems to be happening all the time.—Yours sincerely, Sophonisba."

How I wished she could see for herself too! But when she came back she would not be the same Sophonisba. She would be a Society beauty affianced to a Society parti.

"The fairy prince" had made no appearance in her *letters*, but might he not have made an appearance in her heart? Probably in the very next letter there would be casual mention of some one young and handsome, possessed of every manly attribute, who "seemed rather nice." Then I should know that my silly, presumptuous dream was entirely at an end.

I must say the little interest displayed by her family as to her adventures in London had positively disgusted me. To them her great success, her social triumphs, seem of no account. They speak of her and them in the most casual manner. Of course they would take it all for granted, and that I can understand, but surely even so, keen interest and pride might be permitted to appear. Then Mrs. Kearness must guess what it is bound to mean! Yet she takes the loss of a daughter—and that daughter Sophonisba!—as one might take the loss of a handkerchief.

"The duchess would have Soapy," she remarked to me one day; "she is rather an eccentric woman, you know."

Eccentric because she wanted to show off Sophonisba!

I said I saw nothing peculiar in the duchess' desire to introduce Miss Sophonisba to all her friends.

Mrs. Kearness opened her eyes very wide at me. "Oh, but you know what Soapy is!" Then added,

"At least you have seen her, if you scarcely know her to speak to!"

I became very red.

"Er—I may have spoken to her!" I stammered.

"Oh, have you? Then you see what I mean?"

I did not see what she meant, I only saw—and rejoiced—that she was quite blind to the fact that I had dared to get to know Sophonisba quite well. I gave a vague reply.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE RETURN OF SOPHONISBA

TWO more letters arrived for me from Sophonisba. Her reticence upon the matter of "the fairy prince" thoroughly alarmed me. It seemed the most fatal sign, I thought. Yet why should I begrudge her her happiness? I was deeply and bitterly ashamed of my own meanness, and yet continued in it just the same. I hated Sophonisba's husband with a truly awful hatred. I could have joyfully taken him to secluded spots and run swords in him, or pushed him over cliffs and things. It seems as if even old fogies have primitive streaks in them. I'm afraid I have rather more than a streak.

The more a thing means—whether it be a grief or happiness—the less one speaks of it to others. And it would, I know, be so with Sophonisba. She did not belong to the shallow who trot out their griefs and joys for all and sundry, and thoroughly enjoy sharing an orgy of emotion!

The Bachelors' Buttons have come up all right this year—I forget if I have mentioned the fact before. They bloomed from March to June, and seemed to think they owned the place. They are rather dull and commonplace-looking things, I consider, but then, what else can one expect? They are suitable, and "true

to type!"—and one can only leave it at that and not grumble.

"We reign here," they seemed to say, "and you know it! There's nobody to dispute our power, and never will be anybody! So there! Ha, ha!"

Next to Sophonisba's husband, I disliked the Bachelors' Buttons.

They make a scarlet and white carpet close to my gate, and everybody comes and looks at them, and congratulates me on the fine show they make. People say they are the very finest Bachelors' Buttons they have ever seen.

Mrs. Gellet laughs about them and says, "They are quite a challenge," whatever that may mean. She is not Mrs. Gellet any longer, being married to the young man at the bank, but I call her Mrs. Gellet just the same. It is not complimentary to her husband, but I never can be sure about her name, whether it's Smith or Jones, I mean, and I dare not venture either, because a Mrs. Smith is infuriated—I am told—at being called Mrs. Jones, and Mrs. Jones won't answer when addressed as Mrs. Smith! So as far as I am concerned, she will always be Mrs. Gellet. I am sorry on account of the young man at the bank, a decent lad enough, for it cannot be very pleasant to have your wife always called by the name of her first husband whom you naturally wish to pretend never was! One would hardly feel properly married, I should fancy.

Pansy came down to persuade me to go to Bella's wedding, but of course I could not be persuaded. I said old bachelors were out of place at weddings.

"Oh, Edward, surely you're not still hankering! Why, it must be some months now!"

"What must?"

"Miss Pollyt refusing you—or rather Lady Withins—well, it's not everybody who is refused by a Lady! She hadn't to wait long, had she? Lord Withins just dropped dead a few weeks after the wedding. Some people are lucky. Herbert" (Herbert was Bella's fiancé) "has a simply dreadful old aunt with heaps of money, whom we've got to ask to the wedding, but she won't drop dead, she'll live to be eighty or ninety, and then, probably, leave her money for cats, but of course one has to take the risk, and make a lot of her! *All* heirs deserve their money when they get it. I'm sorry about your disappointment of course, but it seems like Providence. Now you can settle down contentedly for the rest of your life, and be quite safe from all the others. *All* women hope to the end."

I laughed drearily.

I did not think Miss Pollyt would be angry that I allowed Pansy to suppose I had loved her in vain, she would have laughed at the little jest with me, and saved me from Pansy.

When Sophonisba went away, I had gone by an earlier train—assisted by Angus—to the junction where she had to change, and there awaited her and seen her into the London train, there being mercifully no other train going elsewhere for me to see her into. Nobody knew anything about it, Mrs. Kearness least of all.

When I found the train she was coming back in, I took the very first train to the junction again, and there awaited her on her homeward way. I decided I would travel back with her to the station before Hill Land. I should learn the worst at once. When a

man is going to be hanged, he prefers to know the date of his own execution.

I was at the junction hours too early—my friend, the station-master told me—and at first I thought the train was never coming, or had gone somewhere else. Then I got into a fever, thinking an accident must have happened. He had been an impatient sort of man, this station-master, till one day it occurred to me to start giving him sovereigns. It is very useful to have sovereigns to give away. I should have had more if it had not been for a cowardly dread of Angus and Dorothea. Whenever I went anywhere they used to ask me how much I had in my pockets, and not guessing I should want to spend it, I would take it out and let them count it ; but when they found I had been giving it away, and in what they considered a foolish manner, they used to scold me dreadfully, and seem quite upset about it. It's the only thing I have against them—their closeness with my money. They grudged a wretched little barrel-organ monkey a sovereign, and a child too, because it's eyes reminded me of somebody's, and they hated my going to the junction.

I think people who despise money are very foolish.

It must be rather hateful for a man who adores his wife to be poor. He must want to rob and do all manner of dreadful things when he sees other women go flaunting by in their finery, and his beloved labouring in the household with her wardrobe empty. For Sophonisba I could cheerfully have become highwayman. I am not sure, but I almost think, I could have slit throats, or at least have made the victims think I meant to.

But when she returned from London dressed in

grand clothes, with fine shoes and holeless stockings, I saw I need not trouble myself in that way at least. Some one had already provided her with all she needed, and yet, illogically, I wanted the old shabby Sophonisba—aye, even to the holes in her stockings!

When one gets out of the London train there are two trains leaving the junction at the same time, though with very opposite intentions in life. One stops at Hill Land, the other rushes through it, though it slows a little for a few moments in entering, and where it goes to I have never been able to find out.

I fancy it hardly knows itself.

I asked the station-master as I slipped the usual offering into his hand, to prevent me—by force if necessary—ushering the lady I had come to meet, into the wrong train. He took his oath, that, whatever might happen to the rest of the world, for us all would be well.

So when I saw Sophonisba in her grand clothes in a carriage, I had nothing to distract my thoughts. She did not wait for my help to jump down, and at once buried her nose in the huge pile of roses I had brought to greet her. Then I knew she was the same Sophonisba in essentials, whoever or whatever had come into her life.

There was a young man in the carriage with her who took all the sunshine out of the world for me. Of course he was the duke—though he did not look in the least what I imagined a duke would look like—and Sophonisba was bringing him home to introduce to her people. I nerved myself to congratulating him, and leave them together.

To my surprise he alighted without even looking at

Sophonisba, and I realised to my great joy he was a stranger after all. The worst might have happened; but he was not coming home with Sophonisba—and that at least was something.

She was looking pale at first, though almost as soon as I could get to her, she had her lovely pink colour.

"Fancy you!" she said.

"Didn't you guess I would be here?" I returned, astonished.

"What lovely roses!" was all she said. "And what air! The air in London tasted of soot and motor-buses and dust. It's jolly to be back! If only they don't find out!"

A look of alarm spread over her face.

"Oh, Sophonisba, what have you done?" I gasped.

Elopements, secret marriages, all manner of things, flashed into my mind.

"It's what I haven't done!" she groaned. "I'm in a bit of a mess, and that's a fact."

"Won't you tell me?" I ventured.

"Certainly not!"

I grew more and more uneasy. Had she got to care for an unworthy young man? Women do such things, I know, and how could Sophonisba discern all life's pitfalls? Some plausible scoundrel! It hardly bore thinking of. Of course the engagement would have to be broken off, and she would be miserable. I should be obliged to look on at her misery.

A mean little devil whispered that perhaps afterwards there would be some chance for me. I was ashamed and snuffed him out of existence—or at least I hope so. But you never know with these mean little devils, there are so many of them for one thing, and

they are so cunning, calling themselves by quite other names. One never knows where one has them, and it too often amounts to them having you.

"If—if it's a poor man, and he's all right other ways, and it's only money, there will be money," I murmured. I would settle the greater portion of my fortune upon Sophonisba. My natural heir, Tom, would not like it; but he was quite a rich young man without my money, and would have to make the best of it.

"I think you're the silliest old thing I ever knew!" said Sophonisba, but she said it in a way that somehow cheered me up.

The station-master came up and said the train was ready. He took us to a carriage and locked us in. I gave him another sovereign without Sophonisba suspecting.

As soon as the train started, however, she asked me how much I had given the station-master.

I lied. I said I didn't know, but it might have been sixpence or a shilling.

"Station-masters don't look at sixpences," she retorted, "or *buzz* round for shillin's. That man did nothing but buzz all the time! He might have been a hen, and you his one chicken intent on tryin' to swim——"

"He'd promised I shouldn't get in the wrong train," I murmured.

"When had he promised that?"

"Oh, when I came."

"What train did you come by?"

I told her.

"So you gave him something then, and when he put us in here! And you came by a train hours too early!

Really some men have no sense at all!" she spoke crossly. "How much altogether, Mr. Delland?"

For a moment I saw an awful resemblance to Pansy. And yet I could not associate anything so awful as common-sense with my peerless Sophonisba! And I knew I had to tell the truth, and told it, reluctantly—even sulkily.

"You are as unkind as Angus and Dorothea," I added miserably, "they make me count my money before I leave the house, and I have to count it out before them when I return, and if there's a—a little difference, they ask me whether I've spent it, or given it away. When I can say I've spent it, they ask no more questions, but when I've given it away, they scold me——"

"They are quite right," said Sophonisba. "People have to be protected against their better instincts."

"But I've nobody to spend it on," I said plaintively.

"You have yourself."

"I hate spending money on myself, besides I've bought everything I could think of. It's so dull. I tried spending it on Dorothea's baby, but they stopped even that!"

"Well, don't cry over it!" retorted Sophonisba, laughing. "You sounded too plaintive for words! But promise me to be sensible in the future."

"Not sensible?" I implored.

"No, I suppose that is too much to ask! But more sensible. I should like to think you had a rational moment now and then. Well, you'll have rather a lot to explain to Angus and Dorothea, won't you? Did you give any more sovereigns away?"

"Only—only to a little boy," I said apologetically, "and only one, Sophonisba."

"And why?"

"I was feeling so happy," I said awkwardly. "I have missed you a lot, and you were coming back, and —and it might have been his birthday, you know. He—he looked as if it was his birthday," I added miserably, "and nobody gave me anything when I was a little boy, and 'Melia-Hann was furious when I tried to give her sovereigns!"

"So you tried to give her money, and she refused it?" She looked at me oddly, "What did she say?"

"She made me feel rather a bounder," I confessed. "I just slipped them into her hand, you know, and said what a fine day it was; and she looked at them hard, and then at me in such a way, and I thought she was glad to have them. Then her face went awfully red, and she put them on the gate and turned away, and said, 'I come 'ere as a friend, mister! When I wants yer blarsted charity I'll arsk for it,' and of course I apologised, and she forgave me."

"There are not many people like 'Melia-Hann—worse luck!" said Sophonisba drawing a long breath. "I couldn't have withstood the temptation if I had been her, and under the circumstances . . ." She leaned forward, and looked at me earnestly. "Mr. Delland, will you promise me this? That when you feel you have to fling sovereigns about, you will bring them to me, and I will distribute the money among the poor of the parish in a rational manner?"

I promised eagerly, and diving into my pockets, emptied their entire contents into her lap. "I've been feeling like that all day," I said.

She counted the money and put it in her bag.

"It's awfully difficult to hide things from mothers with five daughters," she said suddenly. "There'll be the very devil to pay if it leaks out. The duchess went on the ramp straight off! Oh dear, oh dear, whatever shall I do! And I do hate lies!"

"So do I," I broke in feelingly, "but then mine always get found out!"

"Silly old blighter!" she murmured to herself. "Who'd have thought that was his little game all the time!"

"Sophonisba," I burst out, feeling I could bear the suspense no longer, "did a duke ——?"

"Did a duke what?" she asked crossly.

"Propose to you?"

She laughed. "Not much!" she said. "Are you gettin' at me? Do you think they're runnin' about loose all over the shop?"

"Then did the thing that comes next to a duke, an earl—did an earl?" I asked. I was determined to probe the thing to the bitter end.

"The earl was married, it was he I told about havin' a hot bath ready for me!" She laughed delightfully. "He was a dear—that man!"

"Then a peer?"

"No; nor a 'beer' either," she giggled.

"A baronet then?" It seemed to me a baronet was a sad come down for a girl like Sophonisba.

She went very pink, and my heart sank. "You're gettin' warm," she said.

"Then you have come back engaged, as I knew you would?" I asked faintly. "Of course I'm awfully pleased, you know, Sophonisba, and I do hope you will be very very happy!"

"Sorry to disappoint you," she said in a cross tone; "but I'm still on the shelf, and likely to remain there, as far as I can see." She kicked at her travelling bag on the floor of the carriage.

"You—you *aren't* engaged?" I shouted, amazed and overjoyed. "But why——"

"Perhaps nobody axed me," she said.

"Don't be absurd!" I spoke a little hotly, for I knew a multitude must have asked her.

She jerked her head about so that her hat was first over one ear and then over the other, and yet, what would have proved disfiguring to the rest of womankind, was but the more becoming to Sophonisba, and her cheeks had the loveliest colour.

"Well, then, if you must know," she said, "he was old, an' fat, an' bald, an' I simply couldn't—though lots wanted to! Only you won't let mother guess, will you?" She gazed at me in almost a terrified fashion. "You see, she wouldn't mind him bein' old, an' fat, an' bald. It does seem rum that nothing—not even gentlemen—happened to the others, and fat baronets an' things to me, doesn't it? The duchess said it was my pose. But I didn't pose—I was just myself!"

"How could you be anything better?" I exclaimed. "Oh, Sophonisba, *how* fat and old and bald?"

"Oh, disgustin'!" she said shortly.

"*How* disgusting?" I faltered. "Older, fatter, balder than I?"

She went so pink that I saw he could be no worse than I was, and likely enough a good deal better. She was uncomfortable, because she hated to hurt my feelings, and could not avoid the fatal truth.

"Oh, don't be silly!" she said.

"As old, as fat, as bald?" I persisted, rushing on to destruction.

"Quite fat, quite bald, quite old," she returned. "If you must know, when he was in a taxi, nobody could cross in front of him. Now do you see? Simply horrid, and he couldn't have been a nice-minded man or he wouldn't have done it——"

"Proposed?"

"No—kept gettin' fatter an' fatter and pretendin' not to mind, an' that it was a joke, and constitutional, and came of a happy disposition, an' the fatter you were the easier to live with, an' tosh like that! An' to pretend to fall in love—a man with such a shape! Quite nasty, I thought. It made one so conspicuous, too. He never thought of my feelin's, an' he proposed in a taxi. I thought it low, an' I said so! Fancy bein' proposed to in a taxi, Mr. Delland! Of course when I'm an old maid, it will be somethin' to be able to say I've refused a baronet in my youth. I needn't mention his figure. And it was a proposal! He said all the legal things, and the taxi-driver must have heard."

I could not quite, I must confess, understand the attitude of Sophonisba. She seemed half angry with the unhappy wooer, and yet—at the same time—almost exultant. All I knew was, I was wholly and selfishly delighted with the fate that had brought Sophonisba back to me, a star as out of my reach as ever, but a star as yet unclaimed by another.

"But——," I began.

"Oh, I know! I should have shut my eyes and said, 'Thank you very much, and I'm awfully obliged,' like heaps of wives have done, I should think, judgin' by appearances. If you want to get married

you mustn't be particular if you are just an average sort of person—or worse! But I couldn't, and there's an end of it! Mother will make no end of a fuss when she finds out. He was fat to an extent that doesn't bear talkin' about. He was the fat man I told you I thought was such a friend of the duchess, till he showed his cloven hoof. Besides he was a widower."

She spoke as if that ended the matter; indeed, as if widowers had no right to exist.

"But——" I began again.

"Widowers are disgustin'," she said decidedly. Sometimes Sophonisba appears a trifle drastic.

I was moved to the defence of a most unhappy and unfortunate class. I felt I had to protest.

"Oh, Sophonisba, they can't help it," I said.

"Do they try?" she demanded with a snort.

"Oh, Sophonisba!" I could only murmur faintly.

"Put not your faith in widowers, or in their efforts to avert bein' widowers," she said. "And above all, put no faith in their sorrows. Giddy old birds, I call 'em, with a lot of dangerous experience which makes 'em pretty nippy. If you ask me, widowers are mostly on the look-out!"

"Some of them must be sorry," I persisted, "suppose—suppose you had a widower, Sophonisba?"

It made me feel faint to think of it, but I wanted my dear girl to be fair. There must be many heart-broken widowers, and hers, I knew, would be one of them.

"Well, I haven't in any sense of the word, and don't mean to have, Mr. Delland!" she returned rather shortly. "How can they be sorry when all the time they are tryin' to marry you?"

Of course that was a difficult question to answer. I left it unanswered.

"They do want to marry you, don't they?" she went on.

"Naturally!" I said. What man, widower or otherwise, but would not want to marry Sophonisba.

"Then do be logical! They couldn't marry you if their wives were alive, could they?"

"Of course not!"

"Then they are glad their wives are dead," retorted Sophonisba. "If they try things—he did—bein' lonely an' all that, an' wantin' sympathy, well, they are just pullin' your leg, an' tryin' to get you by an artful dodge! They run after all the young girls for all they are worth. It's easier to get away from a young man any day than from a widower. Nasty creatures! Just skippin' with joy because they *are* widowers!"

"I shouldn't," I said nervously. "I'd never, never want another wife. I'd want to keep the one always——"

"Suppose it was mother?" said Sophonisba.

I gasped under this cold douche of water.

"I had never supposed anything of the sort," I said haughtily. "I shouldn't think of taking such a liberty."

"Then why take it?" snorted Sophonisba. "Here we are at Bowlong! Hadn't you better get out here and take the next train?"

"Yes," I sighed, "I suppose so. Only you are not angry with me, are you, Sophonisba?"

"I suppose you took a return ticket?" she replied.

"I—I believe I forgot," I answered shamefaced.

I plunged my hands into my pockets and found them empty. Sophonisba looked at me and laughed, and then pressed the necessary sixpence into my hand. "Now be a good little boy and you shall have a nice little ticket," she said.

"Oh, thanks awfully, Sophonisba!" I exclaimed gratefully.

The guard came and unlocked the carriage for us, and I got out. Again I plunged my hand into emptiness!

When I returned home about an hour later than Sophonisba, so that nobody knew what friends we really were, I wondered what I had better say to Angus and Dorothea.

I decided to say nothing.

However, they caught me just as I was slipping safely in by the side entrance, and said I was lucky to have had such a fine day.

I agreed with them.

Then there came the pause I dreaded.

In desperation I turned my pockets inside out, and they contemplated the sight more in sorrow than in anger.

"I think, sir," said Dorothea firmly at last, "that perhaps next time it would not be a bad thing to have Angus with you to save you trouble."

"Was it babies, or monkeys, or station-masters?" asked Angus in a tired voice. "Oh, sir, if only you could say just for once you'd spend it on a regular bust, or a lady, or something, but droppin' money about like—like dirt; it's enough to make folk turn in their coffins! Somebody earned that money once, even if it was hundreds of years ago, and folk ought to

remember it and respect it proper. Who got it, sir—damn them ? "

I went most frightfully red.

" I gave it to one of the Miss Kearnesses for the poor of the parish," I stammered.

" Oh, if Miss Soapy took it off you, that's all right, sir, and we'll say no more about it," said Dorothea generously.

I felt I was acquitted. Even Angus knew that Sophonisba could do no wrong.

CHAPTER XXXIV

I SERIOUSLY OFFEND SOPHONISBA

THERE is a proverb to the effect that love is blind.

I do not think it is a true proverb. The more I get to love Sophonisba—and my love for her grows daily—the more clear-sighted I become ; every fresh time I see her, I discover some new perfection of face or character. I think other people are much more blind about Sophonisba than I am.

It is more than delightful to have her back—and to know her glad to be back. She is ever so sweet and friendly to me. I am the only one who is in her confidence, and knows how awful it would be if her mother guessed what had happened in London, for Sophonisba told me her mother actually wanted her daughters to marry, and didn't care how many of them she lost ! But, of course, she wants to lose them to really good matches.

" If the fat widower leaks out, I'm fairly in the cart," Sophonisba told me, looking very worried, " and once or twice I've almost screamed—they've got so warm ! When you've five daughters, and only two hundred a year, which may stop any time, widowers count just the same as others, and more so when they're baronets.

I get the hump and nervy and re(when anythin' approachin' the thing is mentioned. I had to clear out. You see, I keep givin' myself away, and they're bound to suspect somethin' in spite of its bein' me. When the word ' baronet ' is mentioned in connection with somebody or other, or widowers, or fat people, or proposals, or gettin' married, and oh ! hundreds of things, my nerve goes, and I crumple up, and hardly seem to know what I'm sayin' or doin' ! I thought I'd ask Dorothea to lend us the baby for the afternoon. We might teach her some words or somethin'."

" I'm sorry to say she's already learnt ' damn ' without any teaching," I said regretfully. " Of course it's Angus. I thought it only right to speak to him about it, and about the responsibility of being a father. He promised to be more careful, and the very next day Dorothea's baby talked about the debble."

We got the loan of the baby, and spent a delightful afternoon by the sundial, improving her vocabulary. I'm sorry to say, however, she preferred " damn " and " debble " to anything we could teach her. She had walking races from Sophonisba to me and back again, and I don't know which of us enjoyed it the most. I cannot get Sophonisba for long as often as I would like, because of her parish-visiting which she has to rush in after she leaves, getting home rather late. Of course, as I pointed out, it was her duty to parish-visit me, since I had only once been to church, and then hadn't behaved very nicely.

Dorothea's baby calls me Delly, and Sophonisba, Soppy, but is pleased to approve of us as playfellows. We had tea in the woods. Dorothea wanted to take the baby into the house for hers, but I dissuaded her.

I determined the child should have a hearty meal and not be reduced any longer to strange edibles. Sophonisba, however, would scarcely let me give her anything, and we nearly had a serious quarrel over Dorothea's baby.

"Old bachelors are so absurd!" she cried.

"They aren't," I said hotly, "and if they are, they can't help it! They should be pitied rather than blamed. A really nice parish visitor would pity them!"

"Well, it's been a jolly afternoon," she said at length, rising with a sigh, "and I've put myself outside a few hundred buns, but I must go and see Amelia's grandmother. The poor old thing is not gettin' any better."

After she had gone, and the baby been taken from me, I got out my sketching materials and made a dream sketch—for in dreams one can be as audacious as one pleases. There is no limit to anything—in the world that lies beyond the poppied fields of sleep.

And I was very audacious indeed!

The picture was of Sophonisba leaning up against the sundial with the sun on her honey-coloured hair and eyes, and a tender, happy smile on her face. She had shoes with diamond buckles—I could give her what I would in my dream—and shiny stockings, and a dress like one of Miss Pollyt's, which on Sophonisba was a marvel indeed. If I had stopped at that! But alas! I stopped at nothing. At her feet were two small replicas of herself, a little girl with honey-coloured curls, and a little boy—honey-coloured too! They were about the same age—perhaps the boy was a few months the elder—and even among the wonders of dreamland,

they were passing beautiful, being the very image of Sophonisba.

It was the best thing I had ever done, and somehow a great comfort to me: Sophonisba was so extraordinarily alive, as were the others too. Perhaps that was the oddest of all, since, as far as I was concerned, they never would be alive.

But when Sophonisba got hold of it I was sorry I had drawn it—or at least that I had not locked it up.

She was in the study looking over some new illustrated volumes I had added to my library, when suddenly she asked me if I had been painting anything lately.

I grew terribly embarrassed.

"Oh, no," I stammered, "nothing—nothing at all!"

But she was already reaching out for the portfolio, which has always been at her disposal, and had the fatal thing in her hand, and was looking at it with her head on one side and a most *peculiar* expression on her face. Though she was beautifully pink, she did not seem put out—just at first.

"Why, it's me," she exclaimed, quite delighted, "and the very living image! However did you do it!"

"I did it by heart," I said, which was true enough, goodness knows! "But it doesn't do you justice," for it was very far from being as lovely as Sophonisba.

She laughed, then she looked at me rather funnily, "and who . . . who are the others?"

Now they were as like Sophonisba as they could be, and I had been terrified lest she should see the whole audacity of the picture at once, and be furious. But, of course, people say no one sees likenesses to oneself, and it was just as well Sophonisba did not. If she had guessed, she would probably have refused to speak to

me again, and I could not blame her. But mercifully, she had not guessed. I should have to lie of course, and most of all I hated lying to Sophonisba, but there seemed no help for it.

"They are nothing to do with you, nothing, Sophonisba," I exclaimed feverishly. "I just put them in for the perspective, and balance, and things."

She flung the picture face downwards on the table, and glared at me so fiercely that I began to fear my lie had been—as usual—detected. But it was not that.

"I thought maybe they were somethin' that had escaped from the Zoo," she said sharply, "or freaks from Barnums. They're more like a pair of pink-eyed monkeys than anythin'!"

It was hard to sit there and not contradict, but I managed to do it. She was angry I could see, and I did not want to make her angrier.

She took up the picture and pushed it right into my face. "Aren't they?" she shouted at me.

So of course I had to say they *were!* It was at least something that she had no suspicion.

She made a sort of rush at the door.

"Why, you're not going!" I gasped. "Oh, Sophonisba, do forgive me! What have I done!"

"What you're doin' all the time!" she retorted. "I've seen as much as I want to, thank you, and a jolly sight more! Let me pass, Mr. Delland! Next time you want to make caricatures of me—and—and monkeys, you'll be good enough to ask my permission!"

"I didn't mean it for a caricature!" I almost wept, "I knew I could never do you justice, but I didn't want it to be as bad as that! And Dorothea will be

very upset if you go. She is getting tea ready in the drawing-room, and your favourite scones."

"Dorothea isn't the only one upset," she returned crossly. "I think you are the most aggravatin' man I ever met. You do simply everythin' *but* do it! I don't believe you are as blind as you pretend! I believe you are gettin' at me half the time! The squire once said you were 'a cunning devil and more than a bit of a hypocrite,' and I'm hanged if there aren't times when I believe him! You can't be as shy as all that, but if you think I'm goin' to do it, you're jolly well mistaken, that's all!"

I didn't know what she meant, but I endeavoured to pacify her. I said I had no intention of "doing it" (whatever it was!), that I didn't expect her to do it either, "in fact," I added desperately, "I don't want anybody to do it!"

She made another rush at the door.

But I was in her way, "Oh, Sophonisba, the ones with *currants* in!" I cried. We both adore the ones with currants in.

"I'm sure I've done all that a nice, modest girl can do, even in these times when they don't mind about bein' modest, only about gettin' one somehow," she said, almost crying, "but I'm about fed up with the whole show, and so I tell you straight! If I wasn't sure you did want to, I wouldn't have put up with what I have, but I didn't mind *helpin'!* Some men won't even take their share, it seems to me. You needn't think I mind; it's a relief, if you want to know. You can hang on to your beastly Bachelors' Buttons to the bitter end! A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse! 'Tanyrate, a rich baronet did it legally, even though he

was fat, an' a widower. He didn't shirk his fences, but went straight at 'em like a man, he——"

She dashed past me by a ruse and flew down the drive.

I flew after her. I felt we could not part on such terms of terrible misunderstanding. If only she would explain what I had done that I ought not to have done, or left undone that I ought to have done! But I was utterly at sea.

As I ran, I kept murmuring abject apologies, and imploring her forgiveness, but she kept a pace ahead, and wouldn't turn round.

"They needn't have had noses like that, 'tanyrate!" she said at length, stopping and glaring at mine.

"Who?" I asked, utterly bewildered.

"The—the Zoo things!"

I wiped my heated face. Thank God, she did not guess for a second whom the "Zoo things" were meant to represent! I could not bear to hear Sophonisba's lovely dream children so libelled, and felt I had to say something in their defence.

"I thought them very nice," I said firmly.

Sophonisba snorted, "Oh, yes! nice enough for me, you mean!"

"Oh, Sophonisba, they were the living image of you!" I blurted out. "What more could you ask?"

"That they should have been a jolly sight less like me—the poor little brutes!" she returned. "I shan't come again," she went on, "I'm goin' to give it up—so there!"

"Oh, Sophonisba, not everything, surely," I said humbly. "If I had my way no woman should ever do anything she did not want to do!"

"Huh! You and your prize ginger poodles!"

I was more than ever at sea. I had no poodles, prize or otherwise, and ginger was a colour abhorred of me. It made me think, for one thing, of Mr. Kearness, whom I could not help rather disliking, though he *was* Sophonisba's father. He took his responsibilities to his daughter far too lightly, I thought. I have only Satan, poodles being a breed I greatly dislike, and it seemed to me Sophonisba was being a little unfair in her wrath.

"You know I have no poodles," I said with some heat, "and I don't want any either!"

"Just as well you don't," she returned. "Personally, I have always loved the idea of bein' an old maid, it's so—so comfortin'! No beastly house or husband to run, no silly man talkin' rot, no kids wearin' out their boots an' things. It's a nice soft job, an' I'm glad I can get it, jolly glad . . .!"

She put her handkerchief suddenly to her eyes, and flew down the road vicarage-wards.

I saw her no more for ages.

At times it is difficult for a dense old bachelor to understand anything so divinely complex as Sophonisba. Her conversation had been practically double Dutch to me.

As far as that goes, I find most women, even Dorothea, difficult of comprehension at times, and Pansy often baffles me.

For instance, the very day after Sophonisba had snubbed me so unmercifully, Pansy came down and snubbed me too.

Her first words were, looking me up and down the while, "*All* men are liars."

I felt annoyed. It was not true of all men, and certainly it was not true of me. I never told a single

lie more than I could help. It was not only hateful, but futile.

I reminded Pansy—perhaps a little stiffly—that she was practically guilty of the error of misquotation. I corrected her by pointing out that the condemnatory words had been prefaced by, "He said in his *haste* —— consequently," I added, "he was sorry after he had said it, and apologised."

"He wouldn't," said Pansy. "No Bible people apologised. It hadn't come in then. They just did things, and went away again."

I am ashamed to say we argued this point with some heat for half an hour.

"Oh, Edward, don't be silly and obstinate!" Pansy exclaimed at length.

"You might as well say, 'There is no God,' was a Biblical text," I went on doggedly, "because you preferred to omit the prefix, 'the fool has said in his heart!"

"Don't be argumentative! *All* men love argument, and then they lose their tempers, and say women have no logic, when you contradict them. Besides, I thought you did not believe in that sort of thing. You never go to church!"

"It must be rather a limited sort of God that's only to be found in churches, Pansy," I returned. "And which church? They all claim the special Divine Presence for their sect, don't they?"

"It's not a subject for a week-day, Edward. *All* nice people ignore such subjects on week-days. *All* men make fools of themselves when they argue. I came about something very different. Edward, you have been deceiving me!"

I only wished I could!

"I!" I exclaimed.

"Now, Edward, don't pretend! You told me you were a blighted being, that you should be an old bachelor always now, and were perfectly safe! Instead of that, what do I find?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," I said faintly.

"I find you carrying on with the Soapy one! Oh, Edward, aren't you ashamed!"

I was utterly taken aback. The blood flew to my face, and I gasped helplessly.

"Now, Edward, don't deny it! And after telling me you had done with women for the rest of your life!"

"I never said that!" I stammered.

"If you didn't say it in words, you led me to believe it, which is the same. Edward, I am beginning to be afraid that you are not only a liar, but a hypocrite! As for the Soapy one——"

My blood boiled. "I cannot allow you to allude to Miss Kearness in such an insulting fashion," I cried hotly; "please do not use such a name again. It is extremely impertinent, and what do you mean by 'carrying on?' It is a low phrase, and quite unsuitable?"

Pansy looked startled. "I mean flirting," she said.

I laughed. "I! Flirting! How can you be so absurd!"

"I know it seems absurd, when one knows what you are, but do I really know you after all? *All* men keep something back. You may have kept your flirting propensities back. You have been encouraging that unfortunate girl. Heaven only knows what she hopes

and thinks! It is not fair! It is out of the question in every way!"

It was not pleasant to hear Sophonisba spoken of as "unfortunate" because I loved her. Neither was there any need to remind me how absurd were my dreams!

"I know it's out of the question in every way," I said shortly.

"Then, Edward, why give me such a fright? Of course, I know you only just throw a few words to the girl now and then out of—of perversity, and all that, but in a place like this, one cannot afford to throw words to any unmarried woman. *All* girls have somebody round the corner ready to pounce, and ask your intentions. Oh, Edward, why be so careless and thoughtless, and risk so much just as you had settled down so nicely, and I had promised you Tom for the holidays? He really is coming, and will be here on Thursday."

I thought of Thursday with a sinking heart. The house would be no longer my own. Tom would loll about as if he owned it, make heavy jokes, talk slang, and clap me on the back and call me "nunkie" and "old son," both of which I hated exceedingly. I should appear more of an old fogy than ever with a handsome, dashing nephew as contrast.

He would see Sophonisba. To see her was to love her, to love her was to want to marry her, and who knew, but that the handsome, genial nephew might not succeed where the shy uncle had failed? And he was not half good enough for her!

"I'm going away on Thursday," I said.

"Where? For how long?"

"I have not quite decided about that," I replied,

" only that I'm going away, and shutting up the house. A house expects to be shut up now and then, I am told."

It was useless. Pansy merely patted my arm. " You poor dear, you must have been lonely, but never mind, Tom will put that all right for you. He'll be here by the three o'clock train. He won't mind the quiet in the least. Tom never thinks of himself."

Tom was being presented to me in a new light, but since I had got to have him, it was useless to protest.

On Thursday at three o'clock he arrived, his beautiful clothes, fine, handsome figure and face, and equally beautiful luggage taking up a lot of the platform, but creating a great interest and excitement.

Sophonisba happened to be there buying papers. Of course I had to introduce them. One cannot fight Fate. He at once left me to look after his luggage, and escorted Sophonisba and Grace home.

It was the beginning of the end.

CHAPTER XXXV

I HAVE STILL 'MELIA-HANN

AFTER that affair with the picture, Sophonisba kept deliberately out of my way, and had only the coldest nod for me in passing.

And then, of course, there was Tom—Tom who is gay and dashing, and has a ready tongue and a handsome face! He practically lived at the vicarage, though he condescended to come to Moss End for meals. He said they had asked him to take "pot luck" once or twice, but he had surmised more pot than luck, and had made the excuse that I was lonely, and liked him to be back for meals, adding, "If anything could persuade me to try livin' on air, it would be a girl like that, but mother would not like it." After which he would probably proceed to tell me some fresh beauty he had found in her—as if I needed telling!

As far as Mrs. Kearness was concerned, his path was smooth enough, since she was ready to part with a daughter or so. I had thought it only right to tell her all about Tom, what a good-hearted young fellow he was, the income he at present enjoyed—an income that increased annually—the fact that he was my natural heir, "and I'm growing old," I had concluded with a sigh.

Mrs. Kearness had said she had noticed me growing

younger, and that since Tom was already so well provided for, it seemed a pity I did not marry and settle down myself. "I know people say you are quite a confirmed old bachelor," she added, smiling, "but I have never felt so sure!"

"You are too kind!" I said drearily.

It was something to think that Sophonisba would have Moss End after all. I found a sort of bitter pleasure in the thought. But the knowledge that Tom was to have Sophonisba, and the dream-picture come true, was all bitterness without alloy. Try as I would—and I did try!—I could not reconcile myself to that part of the programme. He did not seem to me the type of young man that would appreciate to the full the rare value of Sophonisba. Pansy's children were a little apt to over-value themselves and under-value others. Tom was the youngest, and he had been his mother's idol. Naturally he was none the better for it.

He took it for granted that, as far as the prizes of life were concerned, he had only to ask to obtain. It is an attitude that seems almost monstrous to me. Why should a man think he is certain to obtain the greatest of all treasures, just because he happens to want it? Other people want it too—a great deal more than he does!—but they approach it in fear and trembling, not in casual certainty.

In the past Tom had raved about other young women much as he was doing now; might he not also rave in the future?

I think Dorothea saw that something was wrong with me, though what, she could not, of course, guess, and she tried to cheer me up by lending me the baby most of the time.

But even Dorothea's baby deserted me for the young and handsome. Tom had rolled her on her back, been generally rough with her, called her a jolly little beggar, and played with her in an uproarious fashion, and the blue-eyed mite promptly became his devoted slave.

I seemed to be losing everybody.

I don't think Dorothea cared about Tom. She would snatch the baby from him—in spite of the child's furious protestations—and mutter under her breath of "Tom cats giving theirselves the airs of *h*eirs," and offered him the dishes in a slighting manner, putting his plate in front of him as if he had no right to a plate at all. And Angus, when Tom complimented him on his digging, and the excellent state of the garden, said—apropos of nothing so far as I could see—"there's many a slip twixt cup and lip," and marched off without another word.

Certainly Tom *did* act the young heir, but he acted it very graciously, and gained the high opinion of everybody in Hill Land. I had never seen any one so popular. Even the squire said how handsome he was, what a good sportsman, what a man of the world, and strolled about with him arm in arm, telling him his stories, at which Tom roared. Then Tom told his in return, and made Pollyt bellow. It was roses, roses, all the way for Tom, as it had been from his cradle! His fond mother had smoothed all obstacles out of his path; he had never had anything to overcome, never anything to fight for; he had dropped into the easy way and strolled gracefully along the primrose path. He had inherited his father's capacity for making money, and finance, too, had gone well with him. On

the whole, I think, it is very much to his credit that he remains an honest, clean-living, clean-thinking Briton, and that everybody likes him.

I wonder how long it will take him to get engaged. I think the Toms of this world get engaged quickly and easily, and I keep bracing myself up to bear the news without showing my real feelings.

If only he will make Sophonisba really happy ! But all the time a horrible little doubt tells me that he will never do anything of the sort. Sophonisba asks more than Tom is capable of giving. He will be a good average husband ; but he will be no more than that. Why could he not seek a good average wife instead of trying to steal the pearl of pearls ?

After having been called " a rum old buster " by my nephew, passed with an icy bow by Sophonisba, screamed at by Dorothea's baby, who sought rather the companionship of the heir, and crushed by Angus, who said harshly " There ain't no sense in keepin' *all* your efforts for diggin'," and declined to tell me a funny story, it was a little balm to find I had still one friend left in the world, " 'Melia-Hann."

Her friendship was still mine, her loyal little soul unshaken.

I chanced upon her outside the village being violently set upon by two boys of her own size. She made a valiant fight for it—I never saw a better—but the two were one too many. Little blackguards, I found an almost vicious satisfaction in knocking their two heads together, and treating them with considerable violence ! They fled yelling, their high crests lowered.

'Melia-Hann egged me on to crime, but I stopped short of that.

Then I took out my handkerchief to staunch the bleeding of her nose.

But she declined it.

"I'll bleed over Farmer Piggot's gate awhile," she observed genially, "an' then 'ave yer anky when it's likely to be of some *use*, mister."

So she bled over the gate in a very awful fashion, and I stayed by her, keeping my eyes elsewhere during an operation that made me feel more than a trifle sick.

It seemed rather to delight 'Melia-Hann than otherwise. She said it was "nigh as good as seein' a pig killed."

I shuddered, and plunged into other topics.

When the worst was over—somewhat to her disappointment, I fear—we proceeded amiably down the village.

I asked her how the affray had happened.

At first she did not want to tell me, but by degrees I got it out of her.

"They said yer was queer in y'ead," she confessed. "I telled them if they said it again, I'd giv 'em a good 'idin'. They said it again, so I *guv* 'em the 'idin'!"

"I see," I said gratefully. "I'm awfully obliged to you, 'Melia-Hann."

The spirit had been willing if the flesh had been weak! Perhaps, too, she *had* "given them a hiding" before they had returned the compliment. I had not come upon the scene till later on.

"I'll give the same to anybody as says fings agin yer!" she announced stoutly, her eyes gleaming.

"But *you* say I'm queer in my head!" I exclaimed.

"What I says, an' what *they* says, is nofink to do with it, mister. You're my friend, an' folks can say what they likes of their friends; but they ain't goin' to take nofink from others—specially if it's true."

We were passing the village bun-shop as she spoke, and an inspiration to comfort the somewhat damaged champion with buns and ginger-beer flashed upon me. Why had I not thought of it before? Vague visions of my own far-off youth came to me.

I had so often looked longingly at the outside of a ginger-beer and bun-shop, and never once had anybody invited me inside! My few, very few, pennies had been given me by Mrs. Clive, after first extracting a promise I would not spend them on sweets or things to eat. Indeed, pennies left me unmoved, and eventually I was persuaded—for the good of my soul—to put them in the missionary-box. Of the diabolical wishes that accompanied those reluctant gifts I hardly like to think. I'm afraid my pennies would have gone rather to blast a mission than assist it.

'Melia-Hann assented with almost passionate eagerness.

Then quite suddenly it came to me that I had plenty of pennies to spend on all the forbidden indulgences of youth. I would have ginger-beer and buns too, not only as company with my guest, but also for my own delight.

Alas! my expectations were doomed to disappointment, the longings of youth had departed with youth itself. When the time at length came that I could gratify all my tastes, my tastes had changed. The rosy apple was filled with ashes after all!

But 'Melia-Hann had no such memories. Her thirty years were in front, not behind—which makes all the difference in the world! Briefly apologising for her appetite, she laid herself out to win; and the more I begged her to eat to oblige, the more she obliged.

It must have been a very stodged 'Melia-Hann that I escorted out of the bun-shop. All the way home I had a sympathetic pain across my own chest.

"That was a bit of all right!" she exclaimed with a long, luxurious sigh.

"You don't feel at all . . . sorry?" I enquired delicately.

"Lor, mister, who are you gettin' at! It's somethink to remember—a blow-out like that!"

"We must have lots of them," I said, and added cheerfully, "I adore buns and ginger-beer."

"You didn't seem gettin' along like a house afire, mister."

"I'd just had a big meal," I said, "which makes a difference, you know—at least at my age."

It had made no difference to 'Melia-Hann, though I knew her dinner-hour was over.

"Yes, I spose so," she returned thoughtfully, and then startled me by saying suddenly, "Well, 'ow's young cock o' the walk gettin' on?"

"Whom do you mean?" I asked gravely.

"The chap wiff the fancy westcoats! 'E's a hot 'un, an' no herror! 'Ow's 'is coortin'?"

I winced.

"An 'ow's yours, mister? Been poppin' any questions yet? About time, ain't it? Wimmin don't like bein' kept waitin' too long; 'sides, it ain't very perlite, is it?"

"Oh, hush!" I exclaimed. "Would you like some flowers?"

As I cut the flowers so eagerly seized by the thin little hands, I could not help puzzling over the anomaly of a 'Melia-Hann with such sharpened features, and such a prodigious appetite.

"Fanks! I shall share with granny as usual; she ain't long for this world. Lor, I should fair 'ate to be dead an' missin' all the fun, shouldn't you, mister? But then granny is very old, an' 'as worked 'ard, an' is fair tired out, pore fing! I do 'opes they'll let her rest awhile in 'eaven, afore they put 'er on to the singin' an flyin' round!"

"Of course they will, Amelia."

"Well, we needn't go a'worryin' about 'eaven, fank goodness; but about Miss Soapy. Don't you keep 'er on the 'op too long! It don't pay, mister, it don't, indeed; they takes it out of you aterwards, an' I don't blame 'em!"

I gave her to understand that Sophonisba was otherwise engaged.

She eyed me sharply, detecting, I suppose, the suppressed bitterness and pain in my voice. I did not care that she had seen. It is something to have a 'Melia-Hann for a confidante.

"What do you mean, mister?"

"I'm an elderly old fogy," I said, very busy with the flowers. "Nothing to look at, nothing to say for myself. Youth to youth is the order of the day, the mandate of nature. I—must be content to stand aside, Amelia."

"Then you'll make fings a damsite worse," she said. "I don't *'old* wiff the standin' aside game. I say grab,

and be blowed to yer ! Why should it be Miss Soapy ? Not likely ! In fact—oh, I say mister, you are 'avin' me on ! You're a puffict cure, that's what you are ! Him an' 'is westcoat ! "

And she departed laughing. I went indoors with a sigh.

CHAPTER XXXVI

TIDINGS OF AMELIA

WHEN 'Melia-Hann missed an assignation at the bun-shop, I felt worried. Had she decided that when buns and ginger-beer went hand in hand with the friendship of a fool, their price was too high ?

Sophonisba has a heavy cold, and is supposed to be keeping to the house, but Tom goes to the vicarage just the same—and shows signs of a cold himself ! Is it any wonder I am depressed ?

It was Sophonisba, however, who gave me news of 'Melia-Hann. She actually came to my gate to do so, though it seems a lifetime since she has condescended to speak to me at all.

" Amelia is ill," she said curtly, speaking in muffled tones, owing to the severity of her cold, " and asking to see you. I promised to let you know. It's twenty-five, Lessow Rents."

" Oh, Sophonisba, you will be ill yourself," I cried, distressed at her cold, and her light disregard of it. " You ought to be in bed, or at least in the house on a day like this ! " For a bitter east wind swept down upon us.

" Oh, I'm all right," she said shortly. " My beauty is temporarily spoilt, but I suppose I can put up with

that—havin' enough an' to spare! You will go to Amelia? She seems very seedy, and has set her heart on seein' you. She was only taken ill last night—at least as far as sendin' for the doctor was concerned."

"I will go at once," I exclaimed, distressed at the thought of 'Melia-Hann's illness, "but promise me you will take care of yourself better, or you will be ill too!"

"Oh, it doesn't batter about be," said Sophonisba in her "coldy" voice, and she went away without another word.

What with the cold and hauteur of Sophonisba, and the pinched and wax-like features of 'Melia-Hann, I was more miserable than words can say.

I went at once to Lessow Rents, and found, to my dismay, that it was a regular slum behind the mews. I was horrified to think of 'Melia-Hann living in such a place, breathing such an atmosphere, and when I thought of the washing-money earned by Mrs. Hopkins, I longed to commit assault upon the drunken husband and loafing sons. The Hopkinses had the worst of all the awful pig-sties that went by the name of cottages, and I shuddered as I went inside. Something must be done for 'Melia-Hann. She must be taken away, as soon as she was well enough, to very different surroundings, and I decided to ask Sophonisba to help me to make some suitable arrangement.

The child, looking like a ghost of herself, lay on a dirty bed in an airless cupboard off the living-room. At first her appearance sent a lump to my throat, and I was seriously frightened, but when she greeted me with her usual smile and perky manner, I felt that my alarm had been unnecessary. To think of anything so vitally alive as 'Melia-Hann dying or dead was out

of the question, and I dismissed the idea very sharply indeed.

"Hullo, mister," she observed in a weak, thin voice, "it's nothin' affectious, it's ammonia, and I'm doin' fine, they say, an' the jellies an' fings Mrs. Kearness 'as brought—lor! they was a bit of all right, they was! Not that I 'ad the appetite I could 'ave wished. It's hodd, ain't it mister, 'ow the happetite comes when there ain't no jellies, an' the jellies comes when there ain't no happetite!"

She gave her witch-like laugh—rather a strangled effort.

I winced, for there were times when the philosophy of 'Melia-Hann seemed a rather terrible thing.

"Don't talk so much," I begged her. "You are tiring yourself."

I was shocked at the weak breathlessness of her voice, and the difficulty with which she spoke.

My last flowers, well-nigh dead, were in a big jam-jar close to her. I flung the dead flowers into the living-room fire, and getting fresh water from Mrs. Hopkins, arranged those I had brought in their place.

The small white face lit up.

"Say, mister, you 'aven't the 'and for fixin' flowers, 'ave yer! You should get Miss Soapy to teach yer, she's a proper corker at it, she is!"

"Now, you're talking again, and tiring yourself," I said sternly. "I shall have to go, Amelia. I feel sure the doctor told you you were not to talk, but to take everything easy."

"Oh, I don't fink much of doctors, tho' me granny as 'ad one atendin' 'er for years an' 'asn't took no 'arm of it!" answered 'Melia-Hann, her voice coming

from her like a thin whistle; "this 'ere chap, 'e says as 'ow me 'eart is all queer, an' I've got to be that careful as never was! An' me 'eart would let me know if it was queer, wouldn't it? Doctors fink they know more about your hinside than what you do yerself! 'Ow can I take it easy, wiff fings goin' all 'any'ow in the 'ouse; an' I'd 'ave to bust if I couldn't talk . . . !"

She broke off, choking a little, a grey pallor stealing over her features. In a moment, however, the thing had passed, and she looked at me with her abnormally keen, bright eyes. "Lor, I felt rum for a minute, mister! What's compecations? The doctor says I'll pull through fine if no compecations set in? Sounds nasty, don't they?"

I looked at her in alarm.

"How long have you been ill?" I asked.

"Oh, I've felt a bit queer-like some time, but I 'ad me 'ands full, an' couldn't lay up, but then I was took bad in the night, an' the doctor 'e was in a rare way about me, blowin' all our heads hoff somethink awful, an' sayin' 'e should 'ave been sent for sooner, an' 'e wouldn't answer for the consequences. What's consequence? Is that another of my inards 'e makes so free wiff?"

"I wish I had known sooner!" I exclaimed. Surely 'Melia-Hann would have had a better chance away from this slum? There was no hospital anywhere near, but there were clean homes where proper care and proper nursing could have been obtained.

"Eh, mister, but I was off me chump for a bit," she returned. "I couldn't 'ave you come an' see me then; yer might 'ave frowed it in me teef aterwards! Tommie Burt 'as escaped from the Deformatory, an' they're

after 'im—I'll be seein' 'im 'anged yet. I shall be comin' round to the bun-shop afore long, an' don't you forget it ! "

I went to fat, casual Mrs. Hopkins, bending eternally over her wash-tub.

" Amelia seems very ill to me," I said, in a whisper the sharp ears behind the cupboard door could not hear. " She ought to have a proper nurse all the time, not just the village-nurse coming in now and then, and I think the doctor ought to see her again soon. I will come down first thing to-morrow to see how she is. In the meanwhile . . . see that she lack nothing . . ."

I thrust a five-pound note into her hand.

She gazed at it in a dazed fashion.

" You understand ? " I said a little sharply. " You will spend the money——" I paused, for I thought I heard a stealthy step outside—a step that came slowly, and went away very quickly.

Mrs. Hopkins sat down suddenly, her hand to her heart. " 'S'cuse me, sir," she gasped, " but I've never 'ad the fingerin' of sich in all me born days ! 'Melia-Hann she's doin' fine, she's a tough 'un, is 'Melia-Hann, but she shall 'ave heverything hordered like any duchess, sir ; an' as long as Bill——" she paused suddenly, and added in a rush, " it will be all right, sir, thank you kindly. If there was more of your sort in the world, nothin' to look at, maybe—now my Bill, 'e's a fine, 'andsome fellar—but 'andsome to deal with, the world would be a 'appier place, but we can't 'ave everything ! "

I went back and said good-bye to 'Melia-Hann. I told her I dare not stay any longer because she would

talk, and I was sure talking and excitement were bad for her. I promised to come first thing next morning, and bring some fresh flowers. I shook her frail hand very gently, kissed her awkwardly, and went away, thankful to remember the worst was over, and that she would have everything needful.

That night my dreams were all of 'Melia-Hann standing in a sea of scarlet blossoms, throwing buns at Sophonisba to catch in her mouth, and Sophonisba crying every time she missed one—which was pretty often—and saying, " Oh, it doesn't batter about be ! "

I got up much earlier than usual and went down to Lessow Rents. The poor rose early, I knew.

No sooner had I tapped at the door, than something large and soft fell on the top of me, and I had much ado to save myself from being crushed under the weight of Mrs. Hopkins.

I supported her into the house, and looked towards the cupboard door.

" How is she ? " I asked.

And then she told me.

'Melia-Hann was dead.

" *Dead !* " I said, stupidly staring at her pallid face.

" It were all that fiv-pun note," she began heavily. " Bill, 'e comed 'ome ragin' from the pub, an' axed for money. I said as 'ow there weren't none, an' 'e started beatin' me——"

I choked out an imprecation.

" Pore chap, it was Saturday night, an' 'is birthday," she returned, " an' you carn't go again 'uman natur' in this world, sir ! Well, it alluys upsets 'Melia-Hann to see me knocked about, an' she comed out o' bed to 'ere——"

I saw the feet of 'Melia-Hann, bare of covering, standing on the damp flags; I saw the weakness of the flesh—and the willing spirit.

I motioned to the weeping woman to continue.

"She spoke up proper, she did, but Bill 'e took no notice. 'E got the money off me, an' went off to the pub. He come 'ome at closin' time more like a ragin' beast than anythink, not knowin' what 'e was doin', for 'e's a good 'usband an' father when 'e's sober, none better!—not that 'e ever is what you might call sober." she added. "Pore fellar, 'e pushed me out into the street, and when 'Melia-Hann, what 'ad been lyin' very quiet-like, telled 'im to let me hin, or she'd know the reason why—she an' Miss Soapy bein' the only ones to stand up to Bill—'e turned on 'er, pore chap! 'Avin' no hidea what 'e was doin' or 'er bein' hill or nothink, an' pulled 'er out of bed an' shut both of hus out in the rain. The neighbours took us in, but 'Melia-Hann she went queer at onst, 'er 'eart, the nurse says, an' was gone that suddint you could 'ave knocked me down with a feather! She axed for you, sir——"

"Then why in God's name wasn't I sent for at once?" I demanded in a tone that made Mrs. Hopkins gasp, and put her hand to her heart.

"I wouldn't take the liberty of getting a gent out of 'is bed for the likes of us, sir," she said, in a tone of quiet dignity.

Oh, the awful humility of the poor!

When I could speak, I asked when the child had died.

She told me—with other details—adding, "'Er larst words were about you, sir, an' she left a message, for she knew as she was goin', 'Tell that gent o' mine to

do as I telled 'im,' she says, clear as I'm speakin' now, ' 'an' ax 'im to see I 'ave a rare show of flowers for the fun'ral, an' not to be such a cure ! ' "

I picked up my hat.

" I should never 'ave thought you was one of the jokin' sort, goin' by appearances, sir, but then you never knows ! "

I had got to the door when the unfortunate woman threw her apron over her face, and burst into terrible sobs, " Oh, sir, oh sir, whathever am I to do without 'Melia-Hann ? "

I was the last person able to answer that question.

" She was such a one for fixin' things, from confinements to fun'rals. Heven her father is put out—pore fella ! It comes 'ard on 'im, you know, sir ; as maybe 'e'll fancy 'e was a bit to blame ; an' 'e was alluys rare set on 'Melia-Hann. I take it very kind of you givin' 'er all them flowers. She was rare set on flowers. An' that treat at the bun-shop ! She didn't h'often 'ave enough to heat, didn't 'Melia-Hann ; an' she would tell us 'ow she 'ad heat till she felt like bein' in 'eaven——"

I shut the door behind me.

It was an ill-chosen moment for the author of all this horror to reel up against me. He had evidently been already drowning his grief at the public-house with the money that had murdered 'Melia-Hann. Indirectly I stood responsible for all ; and it was this human beast who had made me murder my best friend.

He clutched my arm, bursting into maudling tears, " You won't be 'ard on a broken-'earted father. I dunno what we shall do without 'Melia-Hann, my 'ole woman ain't no good——"

I had no idea I had ever heard such language as I

discovered myself using. Some time my inner consciousness must have heard, and stored it up for such a moment. Bill Hopkins stared at me dazed, his mouth half-open, and a crowd collected, gazing at me with great astonishment—almost with envy. I went on and on. I said the most unspeakable things, and there was always more where it came from. When I had finished evil words, I took to evil deeds, bashing madly at the brutal face in front of me. I covered myself with blood, whether my own or Bill's I neither knew nor cared. The crowd cheered us with great impartiality, but I think the major support was on my side, for, "Go it, little 'un," rose in a wave of sound. And I went it! If I did not actually break all the bones of the bully, it was not for want of trying! I ground his brutal bloody face on the stones in the gutter. Each time he rose, I knocked him down again; and last time of all, when he rose to fly for refuge to the public, he found his progress assisted by vigorous kicks. And I had on my gardening boots.

He fell into the public-house on his hands and knees, and from his place of refuge gurgled out strange oaths. "'Melia-Hann said you was queer in the yead!" he shrieked, "I'll 'ave yer took back to the 'sylum for this!"

"Well, 'e ain't queer in the legs nor the fists," shouted a voice from the crowd, and I departed, followed by loud cheers.

It seems I am the hero of Lessow Rents! How easy it is to be a hero after all, and how difficult to be a little wise!

When I got home, Sophonisba was crying on my gate. She had heard, it seemed, and recognised my

footstep, for without raising her fair head, she demanded fiercely :

" Why 'Melia-Hann ? "

" God knows," I answered heavily. She had asked the unanswerable question. I held her hand while she sobbed on. I had never felt so miserable in my life, but the warm touch of Sophonisba's fingers helped as nothing else could.

" It's so beastly unfair ! " she choked. " Why not that swine of a father ! Nothin' ever happens to him ! Damn him ! "

But it was something to remember that for once something had happened to Bill Hopkins ! I had left the big, handsome bully little more than a wreck of a man. My mark would be upon him till his dying day, and I thanked God for it ! It had needed something more than my own strength to do what I had done, but my strength had verily seemed as the strength of ten !

Some might have said that Sophonisba's lovely face was disfigured by weeping ; but in my eyes she had never seemed more beautiful.

" What's the sense of it ? " she demanded angrily. " Why ? Why ? Why ? 'Melia-Hann taken, that fiend left ? "

" Don't ! " I begged her.

She raised her face, and for the first time looked at me, and suddenly I saw my blood-sodden clothes, and thought of the spectacle I must present ! I would have fled in confusion, but she had hold of my sleeve.

" Tell me at once ! " she exclaimed imperiously.

" Bill Hopkins."

" He set on you ? "

"No—er—I *rather* think I set on him," I stammered.

A curious gleam came into her eyes.

"He—he won? You are hurt?" she exclaimed.

"No," I said, "I am not hurt."

"But the blood?"

"It must be his, I think."

"You don't mean you got the better of him!" Her voice shook suddenly. "Oh, I hope you jumped on him, I hope you killed him!" Her tone was savage.

"Not jumped—but I had my gardening boots on," I said softly.

Then she dragged the whole story out of me, and stood looking at me for a long time in silence.

"It was brutal, but I'm damned if I regret it!" I burst out.

She held out her hand. "It was heroic!" she exclaimed, "and—and I'm proud to know you, Mr. Delland! I'm glad there's one man in the place at any rate!" She spoke a little bitterly.

"It was nothing!" I said nervously. "I did it for my own satisfaction, and Tom would have done the same—and done it very much better and more scientifically."

"Perhaps!" was all she said.

For a time we were silent, and then she asked me the question I dreaded.

How had Bill got the money?

"It was I who murdered Amelia," I replied with dry lips, and explained everything.

Sophonisba, however, refused to acknowledge me guilty, and though I could not quite take her point of view, it was of great comfort to me.

All the time, however, I was looking at the spot on

the gate where 'Melia-Hann's sharp chin had so often rested. Was it only in imagination that I saw the bar a little hollowed with 'Melia-Hann's usage? I had a feeling that the thin, pinched ghost of 'Melia-Hann would be often found at my gate in the old attitude.

I gave no more money to Mrs. Hopkins—why should I enrich the landlord of Bill's favourite public-house?—but I saw to it that 'Melia-Hann had the funeral that her dramatic sense would have enjoyed. The coffin was a riot of colour, because the child had preferred coloured to white flowers—I was firm on the point—and everything was of the best.

There was a large attendance, for it appeared that 'Melia-Hann had been widely popular, and I seemed to have far more friends than my deserts. My affair with Bill Hopkins, which had been much exaggerated, lent additional interest—I am told—to the affair.

Tom accompanied me, and to everybody's astonishment the squire sent his best carriage-and-pair. I think, for the time being, the grief of Mrs. Hopkins was swallowed up in her pride. Never had there been such a funeral!

"I knows what it's like to feel a real lady," she observed aside to me. "'Er pore granny is that jealous 'cos she can't 'ope for such a show 'erself!"

The doctor had made out a certificate to the effect that 'Melia-Hann died from heart-failure following pneumonia, but he had confessed to me that it was really due to exposure following semi-starvation.

Bill Hopkins was absent.

"It's 'ard on 'im, pore fellar, for 'e was fair set on 'Melia-Hann when 'e were sober, and is too bad to see the fine fun'ral she's 'avin'," said his wife, eyeing me

reproachfully. "The doctor says 'e'll be in bed for weeks, an' 'e can't sit, nor 'e can't lie, nor get no drink, nor nothink!"

"I'm very glad to hear it," I said.

"Men 'as their privileges," she said. "It's come 'ard on pore Bill."

By 'Melia-Hann's open grave I wished it might have come a little harder.

It may seem strange to have to own that this was the very first funeral I had ever been to, but it is a fact. I had missed the train to my Uncle James's, arriving there just in time to hear the will read, which, I believe, created a very bad impression in several quarters; and I was struck not only by the solemnity, but the beauty, of the burial service.

I am told that the funeral was an immense success from every point of view, and the talk of the place for ages.

Ere parting from Mrs. Hopkins, who wept as she took my hand, she informed me that had 'Melia-Hann guessed what she was missing, it would have made her turn in her coffin.

"I can't abear to think as she is missin' it, sir," she faltered. "Do you think they take account of fun'rals up There?" She pointed to the sky. "Do you think maybe 'Melia-Hann has got a little peep-hole, and is lookin' down after all? It won't be all of them hangels what's had a funeral like hers—not but what 'Melia-Hann was hever one to rub it in; but it ain't 'uman natur' not to feel proud o' bein' put away in sich style."

I returned that I was quite confident that the sharp eyes of 'Melia-Hann were looking on from wherever she

might be, and appreciating to the full the magnificence of her own funeral.

" Well, sir, I must get back to Bill. I do 'opes as this hillness won't turn 'im queer, sich as givin' up drink an' takin' up religion, for I couldn't 'old up me 'ead with the disgrace of that ! "

CHAPTER XXXVII

I BECOME A PREY TO MELANCHOLY

I SEEM to have become a regular prey to melancholy. I do not like it, but I cannot help it. Neither do Dorothea and Angus like it, but they do their best to help it.

It appears they are scarcely using their baby at all just at present, and she is almost entirely at my disposal.

"Would you just mind her for a minute or two?" Dorothea enquires. She does not wait for a reply, but, placing the baby at my feet, vanishes, and I am left for hours in undisputed possession. On the whole, Dorothea's baby, who seems to understand any situation, is rather helpful.

She stares at me sympathetically sometimes with her very bright blue eyes, then falling on her face she proceeds to making a voracious meal of my boot-laces.

Of course then I have to take her up on my knee, and she requires so much watching and amusing, I am too busy to have room for gloomy thoughts.

She will sit for ages quite contentedly watching the wheels going round in my watch.

It is a new watch, for owing to Dorothea's baby, the wheels of the last have stopped going round. She insisted on stopping them first with a tiny little finger, and then with her teeth. After that she tried to

swallow it, and when she found it wouldn't go down, threw it on to the stones outside, where its brief and inglorious career ended.

But this new one is a very grand affair, huge and turnippy, and warranted unbreakable by the most determined of babies. It was very cheap, and keeps much better time than the last, and we are both enormously pleased with it.

While I am "minding" Dorothea's baby—or Dorothea's baby from her point of view is minding me—I cannot but be conscious that outside the window Angus is gardening a piece of ground already gardened to extinction, and stealing covert glances at his daughter. He *will* garden outside while I look after the baby within.

But since he pretends not to be there, and I pretend he isn't, it doesn't matter as much as it might.

The truth of the matter is, the man is ridiculously infatuated with the child, though he would have me believe far otherwise.

He disparages all I say in favour of Dorothea and her daughter—for the mere joy of my insistence on their beauty and virtues. I never knew a man so greedy for the praise he never gives himself.

"I don't believe in children as idols, sir," he said one day. "Dorothea's baby is the consequence of bein' married by Dorothea, and there you have it! She's all right as kids go, and might have been worse—twins or something of that sort!"

And he assumes a coldly critical attitude.

Dorothea's baby, however, isn't taken in by it. She immediately proceeds to climb up him, and he disappears behind a bush to hug her violently.

In the matter of Dorothea, his attitude is that of a man cherishing the delusion that he is master in his own house.

" She's a aggravatin' woman, Dorothea," he observes disparagingly, " and I have to put my foot down."

But when I dared a slighting reference to Dorothea and her baby—just to see what would happen—well, I found it better to slip away before it happened, and later I explained that I had been merely joking.

" I knew that, sir," he answered respectfully, " and I was going to do no more than have my own little joke with the spade, sir."

I have not been digging near the gate for ages. Sophonisba is never to be found there, owing to Tom, and there is another in her place who is there most of the time, her abnormally sharpened chin making deeper the impress on the top bar, her abnormally bright eyes fixed on my face ; it is only her sharp tongue that is lacking, for she never says a word.

Sometimes she comes to my dining-table and draws up a chair, looking rather longingly at the tempting food, but far too proud to mention it.

Then I get up and go out, leaving everything untasted. A mouthful would choke me.

If only I had known ! If only I had guessed ! If only it was not for ever too late !

My figure is really nice at last, I actually go in, and Pansy herself would have to acknowledge it. Undoubtedly digging is good for the figure as well as the soul !

In spite of a lean husband, Dorothea has, so it appears, a positive dislike to people going in at the waist. She gets very angry when I leave a meal

untouched, and no matter where I may be, she finds me and gives me a piece of her mind. I always feel very foolish and ashamed, and cannot but think how useful a tail would be! Satan's wags with a tireless energy that amazes me, while his great friend, Dorothea's baby, tries ineffectually to grab it, a game hugely enjoyed by both, but I know where mine would be after a piece of Dorothea's mind. I wonder if Angus ever gets it, and if that is why I have now and then come upon him wilting outside the housekeeper's room, his tail very much between his legs, while he darkly mutters things about "teaching little madams who's master."

"There's folk I'd like to shake till their teeth drops out!" she said to me one day.

"Good gracious!" I exclaimed faintly.

"Can't they see as folk want helpin'," she went on. "Hadn't I to help Angus? Didn't I tell him straight to put up the banns and none of his flummery—the great Gahoo! An' seein' a pore, innercent lamb a fair wastin' away, I wonder they have the heart, I do indeed!"

I moved uneasily, for I had a suspicion that the awful indignity of being classed as an "innercent lamb" was mine, though who was to help me—and how—I had no idea.

Altogether I am having a very bad time of it.

Dorothea insists I shall take what she describes as "nourishment," and nourishment is, I find, a term that covers a multitude of sins consisting of awful concoctions in basins, delivered for administration at eleven, making me feel rather sick, and quite destroying my appetite for lunch. I have always hated "slops."

Mrs. Clive made me take them some thirty years back, then Pansy poured them down my unwilling throat a little later, and to-day Dorothea is chief torturer. I want Sophonisba, and ease of mind, and sympathy; I get slops. Such is life!

Eleven o'clock comes round ridiculously soon after breakfast. Some minutes previous to the fatal hour, I murmur an excuse to Angus, and take my spade to dig elsewhere, but no matter where I am, Dorothea always finds me—owing to the cleverness of Dorothea's baby, who, assisted by Satan, enters into the game of hide-and-seek with great gusto. They find me even in the old pig-sty, and in the branches of the tree where natural seats for two are to be found and have often been used by Sophonisba and myself; in the great cupboard in the library. I verily believe they would find me if I placed the ocean, instead of a mere duck-pond, between us!

Satan goes first, then comes Dorothea's baby, sometimes crawling, sometimes toddling, then Dorothea with the hated nourishment in her hand, lastly Angus, who affects to be looking for his spade, but remembers where he has left it after the worst has happened to me. This awful inexorable procession is watched anxiously by me from my cramped and difficult attitude in the old pig-sty. Will Satan pass wagging his tail, so that I shall be safe, or will he stop suddenly and deliberately "point" at me?

Among his varied ancestors is a sporting one, and from the view of the hunted, I may state that no game ever escapes him. He stops, Dorothea's baby utters a squeal of delight, and crawls into my hiding-place, Satan waiting outside with lolling tongue and artful

eye. He is willing that Dorothea's baby shall have all the honour, since he knows perfectly well who actually is the cleverest dog that ever wagged from morning to night.

"Tum out!" says Dorothea's baby, and I come out!

There is nothing else to be done.

I cannot but feel that somewhere—perhaps in the Elysian Playing Fields of babies passing the time while they wait to be born—the blue-eyed mite has played this game before; and been the first to find, and the last to be found.

I emerge with a face that may be red, but is as dignified as possible under the circumstances, and say with an air of surprise:

"Oh, is that you, Dorothea? Has any one called?"

My eyes are anywhere but on the hateful bowl.

"No, sir," the beautiful smile of Dorothea can be most horribly firm. "Nobody has called. I thought maybe you'd like a little nourishment, sir."

The bowl is held out to me.

"I—I think not. Some other day perhaps, but not this morning, thank you very much!" I stammer feebly, backing like a timid horse.

But I can't back very far. The bodyguard has closed up round me, and the odds are too many. Dorothea is flanked by Angus and the baby, and Satan knows what is expected of him; they are all going to see that I take every drop of it. Out of the tail of my eye I catch the blue determined glint of Dorothea's baby's bright orbs. I am lost, and I know it.

"I thought you'd like it, sir!" The bowl has been

deposited in my hand. She speaks as if I had greeted the suggestion with delight.

At first I content myself with looking at it. It always happens to be the special kind of "nourishment" I most abhor.

Dorothea folds her hands patiently, "I'll wait for the bowl, sir," she says, with a very awful gentleness.

Who am I to keep a lady waiting? Need I say that Dorothea has not to wait over-long?

Then Dorothea's baby offers me a bite of her well-licked chocolate to "take the taste away," but nobody thinks of offering me anything to take away the awful taste of that much-used chocolate.

Therefore you will understand how eleven in the morning can come to mean the hour of doom.

And yet, ingrate that I am, I still remain slim and cheerless!

Even Tom, wrapped up as he is in his own affairs, has noticed something. He observed one day with a start of surprise, "I say, but you do look off colour! Anything wrong!"

I stated, with some emphasis, that nothing was wrong.

He winked knowingly, and became exceedingly hilarious over his own suggestion, that I am suffering from an unrequited affection, and gradually pining away.

Then all at once he became serious—or at least more serious, "I tell you what it is," he stated confidently, "it's gout to a dead cert. You'll have to stop eating and drinking all the things you like."

I received this suggestion coldly.

"The moment the pater begins to get short and

uncertain in the temper, the mater sends for the doctor, and tells him its gout. Then he knocks the pater off his grub, and nobody can go near him but the mater. But you know how wonderful she is ! "

I could imagine Pansy bearing her husband's gout with great fortitude.

" You can save time and money by taking my advice. Now those scones you simply wallow in, old chap, they must be jolly bad because you are so keen on them ! "

" It isn't gout," I said almost fiercely.

" That's what the pater always says, but——"

I reminded him with some asperity that I was fourteen years his father's junior.

He gave an amazed ejaculation, and attacked the cheese as if he had not already eaten prodigiously. Sometimes I resent his large appetite—it seems such a slur on Sophonisba !

" You ought to do a cure all the same," he persisted. " Nothin' like a cure, by Jove ! And you've got the cash to swank it round Hamburg."

That Sophonisba should be put down to gout was well-nigh intolerable.

" It happens to be incurable," I said bitterly.

Tom dropped his knife and fork as he stared at me with paling face, " Good God, uncle, you don't mean it's one of those things that have to be cut out of you, do you ! The mater always said——"

But that was too much ! I brought my fist down on the table with an oath. " Leave my inside alone, will you ! " I shouted. " What business is it of yours ! "

Did I not know Pansy's way in dealing with such matters ? As long as you maintained your health, the outward appearances, at least, of decency were

observed, but the moment you lost it, and worst of all when you were about to have an operation, all reticence vanished. Then your entire anatomy became the property of nobody in particular, but everybody in general. You no longer belonged to yourself, you were the property of Pansy and her friends. They discussed your internal matters in a way that is too horrible for description, every little bit of you was at their mercy, and since medical men cannot observe modesty in certain matters, so Pansy followed their example the moment you became a "case." Never shall I forget staying with Pansy during the time of poor Lady Jellaby's operation, and the frightful knowledge forced upon me as to the anatomy of Lady Jellaby. When, recovered from her illness, the lady came to call, discovering me in the drawing-room, I fled in burning confusion, feeling I knew her far too well and intimately to admit of social intercourse.

So Pansy looked upon me as a "case" did she! She would arrange to have me operated upon, and tell the doctor what he was to find, how much to remove, how much to leave!

Panic came upon me. "I won't be operated upon, I tell you I *won't*," I shouted.

"Now, now, uncle, keep calm! You'll only be doing yourself injury, you know. Just drink this off and bear up, and you see it'll come out all right!" He thrust a glass of brandy and soda into my hand. "Just you buck up! What's an operation! More fun than anythin' these days, everybody says so! Why, lots of people had their appendices removed just to be in the fashion, and have a topic of conversation! And if you've got anythin' really original you'll be the hero

of the hour! Just you leave it to mother, she'll see to everything, you know what she is!"

I gulped the brandy down, incapable of speech.

"That's right! Feel better now?" he patted me on the shoulder. "You're a young man yet, forty—what's forty! and you don't look it, not you! Plenty of go in you, as any one can see with half an eye; see us all out, ten to one! Why, you'll be gettin' married, and havin' kids, I shouldn't wonder. Just you——"

"Damn it, there's nothing wrong with me!" I exclaimed, with some heat. "I've never felt better in my life!"

The boy's face cleared. "But you used to be such a fat old buster, and now——"

"I was never fat," I contradicted angrily. "A trifle stout perhaps. Don't I look the picture of health, you young fool?"

"You look jolly miserable," he answered. "If it's nothing inside, what is it? Is it that Lady Within's biz?"

"I was no more in love with her than she with me!" I returned, sick of misunderstanding.

"Well, then, of course you never were gone in that quarter," he returned, relieved. "It must be pretty beastly to want 'em—and then to get the boot!" His face contracted nervously for a moment. "I say, old boy, I'm jolly glad you're O.K., you know, good people are short."

"Don't talk rubbish!" I said peevishly.

"I mean it!"

"You'll have Moss End and all I leave when I go," I said suddenly. "That's always been understood; but you may have to wait a bit."

He seized my hand, and pumped it vigorously up and down "You silly old blighter," he said roughly, "you silly old blighter! I don't want the old show! I can give my wife as much as is good for her. I say though, you might ask us down now and then."

I winced inwardly, as I said I would. At the same time, the attitude of Tom sent my spirits up. He is a good, affectionate lad, and not the greedy heir I had supposed. I was horribly ashamed of having let my point of view get so terribly distorted. I had seen through a glass darkly and not face to face; and what I had seen, had been but the reflection of my own discontent. It was a lesson that I hoped I should never forget.

As I met Tom's eyes, I felt we understood each other very well, and that there was a link of affection between us much stronger than I had ever supposed.

He cut himself some more cheese with a sigh of relief. "'Course the mater is a mercenary old girl in her way," he said, with his mouth full, "but if it came to a tug between that and her affection, I know I could bet on the winner! You know mothers and their pet ducklings! Wants to see 'em all a real swanky lot! Looks on you as a confirmed old bach. because she prefers you to be a confirmed old bach.! I don't deny I did myself at first. But seein' you with that kid—jolly little beggar!—what!—put ideas into my head, and I got an inspiration, as the writing-johnnies say. 'Why not have kids of his own?' I said to myself, and I ask you, why not, old son? My idea is this: you know I'm on for one of the Vic. girls, the beauty; well, why don't you go in for another? There're three left to choose from, and none of 'em so dusty! Yes, it's

serious, and I'm goin' the whole hog, bridesmaids, and 'the Voice that Breathed,' an' high-steppin' to the altar, lookin' no end of an ass, I'll bet. I've always said a chap that marries before he's thirty is an ass, and is goin' to repent by the time he is thirty, and has had another look round with a bit of experience and manhood to back him; and everybody will remember it an' grin, but then, of course, she'll take the wind out of their sails! Say, uncle, did you ever in your born days see such a wonder?"

I was ready enough to say I never had.

"Rough on 'em bein' so poor and with those looks, but I'll put that right for one, and you might for another, eh, old son?"

"I'm afraid——" I began awkwardly.

"Well, just you think of it, old sport! You need not fear Mrs. Kearness' opposition," he giggled to himself. "She's helped us no end. I bet she'd help you. Why not think of it, eh?"

For the sake of peace I said I would think of it. I even made a feeble and very safe promise. "If you don't steal the pearl, well, she shall have the amusement of rejecting me!"

He laughed. "Well, I can't let you have the beauty, of course number one comes first in these matters, but why not the next? She'll take some beating. It would be such a lark, and so jolly muddlin' you and I bein' brothers-in-law—I suppose we would be brothers-in-law? What relations would our kids be?"

I left him working it out with absorbed interest. Tom goes rather too fast for me, but that, I believe, is the method of the modern progressive young man.

I wondered how I was going to bear to be present at the wedding, as I should certainly have to be ?

I put the question to Dorothea's baby, who had climbed upon my knee with a demand to see the wheels of my watch.

She left it unanswered, for just then she heard her mother's footsteps coming to take her out shopping, a greatly appreciated adventure. I am given to understand that the baby has as much to do with picking the best cut of a joint for my meals as her mother.

She left a hasty kiss on my ear and toddled for the door, though as yet she is not quite sure on her feet, and if nobody is looking, condescends to a crawl. But she is far too proud to crawl before the likes of me.

So she walked to the door.

Her efforts were valiant and full of fearful determination—if a trifle wobbly—and I could not but feel how terribly inadequate were the tiny, toddling feet of Dorothea's baby, to travel that long, long road called Life.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

I COMMIT A DASTARDLY ASSAULT

THE day after we had our little talk together, Tom got a letter from Pansy that made him frown.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed.

"What?" I asked fearfully.

"That she would guess there was something up. She smells a rat, and is coming down at once. She'll have a go at pumping you."

"Why me?" I asked with some resentment.

"'Cos you're easily pumped, old chap," he returned disrespectfully. "You've got such a beastly honest face! What a pot you'd have made as a financier sailing near the wind! You'll have to lie, see?"

"I can't lie," I retorted.

"All the better, she'll swallow 'em easier——"

"She finds me out every time!" I wailed. "And what is it she wants to know?"

"The girl," answered Tom, "and if I'm in any real danger? When I extend my visits, she spots petticoats, and comes down to see about 'em. And I don't want her to know till I've actually been an' gone and done it, and it's too late to say anything. I meant to do it yesterday, but she kept me off it each time, and wore the 'hands off' air! You see, the mater

is determined I shall make what she calls a match, and poor vicars' daughters ain't matches; the mater would call 'em catastrophes—fancy calling her a catastrophe!"

I could not fancy it. Sophonisba a catastrophe!

"So what you've got to do," he added calmly, "is to throw dust in her eyes, old son."

"Me!" I said miserably. "And what are you going to do?" I did not see why all the burdens should be cast on my shoulders.

He winked. "Tell the truth," he said.

I could only stare.

"The mater never believes the truth," he added, "at least not when I tell it! I've only taken to it lately, you see." He winked again.

"Then why can't I tell the truth too!" I implored.

"Because one lie and one truth will balance up, but two truths will merely put me in the cart! No, you must lie for all your worth; say I've spent all my time with you; that I've never looked at a girl, and barely know the Kearnesses by sight!"

"That's not one lie, that's a dozen!" I objected.

"Lies are prolific," he retorted casually. "Two to-day and two hundred the next! She wants you to meet her train, which means she's going to have a shot at you first. Now be careful not to make any damaging admissions, and it'll be all right."

I groaned. I could not fancy myself doing anything but make damaging admissions.

I met the train.

"*All* young men are rash," were her first words.

"Not at all!" I said firmly. I was going to do my best for Tom.

"*All* bachelors know things about other bachelors," was her next assertion, "and though Tom is my son, that doesn't prevent him being a bachelor, does it?"

"I don't know," I said cautiously. So far I had kept my head.

"Don't know! Of course you know! Now, Edward, don't pretend! *All* girls prefer a young bachelor to an old one. Edward, who *is* the girl?"

"What girl?" I asked, with what I flattered myself was well-acted surprise.

"The girl that is running after Tom?"

"She wouldn't run after Tom! She has no need to run after anybody, it is quite otherwise!" I returned, enraged.

"Oh! Then there is somebody! I thought so! The wretched creature has plunged into a flirtation with him! *All* flirtations have an element of risk! Edward, is there any danger?"

"Danger of what?"

"The worst!" she sank her voice fearfully.

"The worst?"

"Of my poor boy being trapped into marriage with some designing, penniless nobody! Tom to marry a nobody! *Tom!* Surely, Edward, you can see yourself how impossible that is!"

"If impossible, why trouble?" I asked as calmly as my rising rage would let me. Sophonisba spoken of in such terms! Sophonisba, who was miles above him in every way! Sophonisba, whose entry into any family would be the greatest honour she could bestow upon it!

"Don't be absurd, Edward! *All* mothers trouble under such circumstances. Of course she is quite determined to make the poor child propose to her?"

The blood flew to my face. "On the contrary, she has already prevented him proposing!" I retorted.

"*All* girls prevent proposals merely to make more sure of them," was her absurd statement. "It's bad when they help, but it's usually fatal when they begin preventing. It shows they know what men are!" She groaned.

"Did you help, or prevent, James?" I asked her curiously.

"Edward! How dare you!" She gazed at me in horror and rage. "James and I were different!"

But I remembered how she had managed James and all that was his for thirty years. Was it likely she had only displayed this characteristic on her wedding-day?

"I think it was very nice if you did help James," I returned seriously, "and must have been a very great help to him!"

Her face went scarlet. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

I was thankful to divert her from Tom's affairs, and to spare myself fresh lying.

"Surely you must *know* what I mean?" I said.

"I never did," she declared almost passionately. "I was not that sort of a girl; besides, it was not necessary!"

"Then it was prevention rather than cure?" I said with an aptness that astonished myself.

It also astonished Pansy. She stared at me with wide eyes.

"Edward, what has come to you? You are not the same person you were a few years ago. I suppose it's the money. *All* fortunes change characters. I wish

I could feel the change had been for the better, but when it's men and old bachelors, *all* changes are for the worse. That you should talk of James like that ! "

" Here's Tom," was all I said.

She flew to Tom with her grievance. " Oh, Tom darling, how well you're looking ! " she kissed him, " but what has happened to your uncle ? He is dreadful ! Tom, he actually said I had entrapped your dear father into marriage ! "

Tom burst into a great bellow of laughter. " Well, mother, if you didn't, who did ? Tell me that now ? "

Poor Pansy ! She stood looking from one to the other of us with blazing cheeks and eyes, and we—brutes that we were !—enjoyed her angry confusion, and the thought that we had rather skilfully carried the war into the enemy's country ! She had forgotten all about Tom and Sophonisba.

But had she ?

She seemed to rally herself suddenly, and turned to her son, her lips very set, " I have been talking to your uncle about you," she said gravely.

" Have you, mater ? And what lies has the old chap been fillin' you up with ? Personally, I've found I can never believe a word he says."

I could only gasp in the background.

To my amazement, Pansy took up the cudgels on my behalf. " Your uncle has never told a lie in his life," she said reprovingly. " He is incapable of it."

I bit a mortified lip. Pansy always underrated my abilities.

Tom gave me a sly wink. " Well, it's never too late to learn," he said, " and he's sharper than you'd think

to look at him ! The truth of the matter is, he's my beastly rival. We both love the Soapy one ! "

I walked on boiling. Tom had assigned to me the part of lying, while his tactics took the easy line of truth ; but what right had he to allude to Sophonisba in such a fashion ?

He was right, however, in saying his mother never believed him when he spoke the truth, for she didn't believe him now. She patted him on the arm and laughed. " You absurd boy ! " she cried. " Then it's nothing serious ? "

" Oh, yes, mater, it's frightfully serious ! He's cutting me out, and the four others are so passing fair, I'm hanged if I know which to propose to. As a matter of fact, I shall start with the eldest, and go through with them. It'll be a bit of practice if it's nothing else. If Sophonisba rejects me in favour of my giddy uncle, what do you say to trottin' out Grace as your daughter-in-law ? "

" Oh, Tom, how ridiculous you are ! " She gave a great sigh of relief.

" Then we'll make it Grace, partner," he returned flippantly, " and trust that hearts will be our long suit. In the meanwhile, how is Patricia Haddock getting on ? You'll ask her to dinner soon after I get back, won't you ? "

" We can discuss that later," she returned cautiously.

We saw Pansy off a little later. She departed quite satisfied, I think.

" I thought it better to make a slight change in my tactics," Tom explained. " Fancy you and me gettin' the better of the mater ! "

I made no answer. I was not altogether pleased

with Tom. But he was in too great a hurry to get off to the Vicarage to notice anything odd in my manner.

He did not, in fact, wait for an answer.

I returned home to find the house in a state of most terrible confusion, and a frantic Angus and Dorothea.

Dorothea's baby was lost !

How it had happened nobody could say. One minute she had been watching her father planting out ; the next, neither she nor Satan were anywhere to be seen, and no sight or sound of them had rewarded the eager and frightened searchers, though that was close on half an hour ago.

I was rather panic-stricken myself, I pointed out that Satan would take good care of her

Dorothea, bursting into tears, said that probably " they " had first poisoned Satan.

We hunted high and we hunted low, but no sign of the household idol rewarded us.

Dorothea kept remembering about the gipsies lurking in the neighbourhood, and what awful faces they had, and how they looked like child-stealers, and had stolen fowls !

Angus grunted, " There was some sense in stealin' fowls, they could eat them. They couldn't eat Dorothea's baby. They'd have the expense of feeding her," he pointed out.

" Oh, they won't bother," cried Dorothea, wringing her hands. " She'll be dead and starved by this, while two great Gahoos stand about doin' nothin' ! "

Angus and I looked shamefacedly at each other, then Angus said gruffly that babies didn't get dead from starvation in half an hour, 'specially after the meal she'd just eaten.

" Maybe it's the last you'll have to grudge the pore lamb," said Dorothea, turning on her husband.

" I'll wire to Scotland Yard for a detective, we'll have the police, a large reward ! " I cried.

At that moment we caught sight of Dorothea's baby sitting blandly in the middle of a flower-bed, Satan wagging his tail by her side. There was deliberate, impish mischief in the eyes of both. If Dorothea's baby had had a tail, hers would have been wagging just as hard as Satan's.

We all had a race who should get there first. Angus would have won, his legs being the longest, when suddenly he fell off in his pace, and Dorothea won after all. I respected Angus.

The baby looked at us with the most innocent of blue eyes, and declined to say where she had been, or why. Satan cocked his head on one side and half closed one eye.

" Don't you wish you may know ! " he said as plainly as ever dog spoke.

The mystery remains a mystery to this day. I think she must have curled up among the flowers, and so have been overlooked. Perhaps she had lain in the huge bed of forget-me-nots, and what we had taken for the blue of a flower had really been the blue of her eyes. At any rate she had won.

She at once demanded my watch and a stick of chocolate. Strictly speaking, it was her hour for neither, but she had both on the instant. When told not to do it again, she said, " Boo ! " and there the matter ended.

One baby had very easily got the better of three grown-up people !

I could not but feel, with a little of envy and a trifle of resentment, how much better was a mere infant at the game of hide and seek—especially hide—than myself.

As it was time for Tom to return to dinner, I wandered down to the little gate to wait for him.

To my amazement there was no sign of Tom, but there was Sophonisba standing in the sunset, and looking more lovely than ever. She had a letter in her hand, and was going to catch the post. But where was Tom ? Why was he not seen outside the Vicarage with her any more ? Had Mrs. Kearness said they were not to go about together until things were settled ? No doubt Tom was waiting for her close by, but in the meanwhile she stood looking—rather wistfully I thought—at Moss End.

She gave a violent start when she caught sight of me, and made for sudden flight, her face deeply pink.

" Oh, Sophonisba, can't we still be friends ? " I pleaded. " Must everything be changed ? "

My inner consciousness seemed to hear a light rustle behind me coming down the rhododendron walk, but I was too absorbed with Sophonisba to notice it. I could see or think of nothing but her. Something about the stillness of the evening, the scent of the flowers, seemed to go straight to my head.

I grabbed her by the arm, " Don't go ! " I said huskily.

The rustle behind seemed to cease abruptly. Satan, if Satan it was, had evidently decided to remain among the rhododendron bushes.

Sophonisba tried to pull her arm away, and I would not let her. In fact, I behaved altogether outrageously.

I not only held her left arm, but seized her hand and kissed it madly.

Then I remembered everything, saw the enormity of my own conduct, and was at once filled with awful remorse. I let her go abruptly.

"Oh, Sophonisba, forgive me," I cried abjectly, "but it was only an *uncle* one!"

In answer Sophonisba dealt me a stinging box on the ears.

"And *that's* a niece one!" she said, and dashed out of sight.

I had no idea a gentle feminine creature could hit so hard, and hurt so much! Indeed, I saw many stars, and all at once. Of course it served me right, and Sophonisba was perfectly right so to protect herself, and I admired her for it! I had lied outrageously in calling it an "uncle one." I had never felt less like an uncle and more like a despairing lover in my life. I supposed I ought to tell Tom. Would he ever forgive me? Would he ever trust Sophonisba alone with me for a moment? I could not blame him if he refused to allow me even to speak to her.

Then the rustle behind me seemed to become distinct and rather disturbing. I turned at once.

I found myself face to face with Dorothea.

I went most frightfully red.

What must she think of me! And yet I had no need to ask my sinking heart that question. She had witnessed the whole episode, and her reddened face and contracted mouth spoke too well the thoughts she tried to hide. I had completely shocked Dorothea.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said. "I couldn't move without bein' seen, I thought that at last . . . an' I

didn't want to stop anything. If you please, sir, dinner is served."

She had never spoken so formally before. I saw I had lost the liking of Dorothea.

"You despise me?" I cried bitterly.

"That is not my place, sir."

"What must you have thought of me!"

"It's not for such as me to say, sir! Poor Miss Soapy!"

I hung my guilty head. Then I put my hand to my ringing, singing ear, and groaned. I had to snatch at somebody's sympathy.

Dorothea had always stood up for me against the world. A criminal must have one friend. I would even take the awful "nourishment" if she wished. All I wanted was somebody to make a fuss over me and let me feel that in spite of all I had done, there was one upon whom I could depend in weal or woe.

But I saw I could no longer look to Dorothea. She eyed me very severely indeed. "I dunno as I blames 'er," she said; "she's done enough leadin' on, and Miss Soapy has her feelin's in spite of bein' so different! She's had more than ever mortal woman had before to put up with, poor young lady, and she ain't no further on for all her pains, an' never will be, I'm a beginnin' to fear! Oh, sir, how can you? Don't you know your own mind yet! Why can't you speak out like a man, or do it in writin'."

"I will—indeed, I will the very next time, Dorothea," I said eagerly, for indeed I wanted to apologise to Sophonisba, even if I could not hope for her forgiveness.

"With some it's always next time or to-morrow,

sir," said Dorothea in a tone that made me wilt up the side-walk.

Dorothea felt for Sophonisba as one woman for another, and could enter thoroughly into her feelings. Naturally she was angry and disgusted.

Each day she seems to get more so, and everything to get worse. I *did* think they would let me have the baby, but no, I am denied even that consolation. Angus and Dorothea are using her entirely themselves at present.

"Folks as is so set on babies can mostly find them for theirselves, sir," she said grimly one day.

I suppose she meant I might adopt a child, but somehow the idea did not appeal to me, and I said heavily, "I don't know where to *look*, Dorothea," and hoped she'd feel sorry.

But she only went out banging the door, and said, "Some folks is born without gumption."

CHAPTER XXXIX

DOROTHEA'S BABY ARRANGES THE FATE OF TWO

I HAVE certainly very bitterly repented my dastardly assault on Sophonisba, but I don't feel any the better for it. Repentance, I have heard, is not enough ; reparation is also necessary to salvation.

Yet how am I to return the kiss I basely stole without adding to my crime ? There really seems no way out.

Whenever I catch sight of Sophonisba, she rushes past me without a word, her face very pink and frowning. I cannot blame her. I cannot blame any modest woman for refusing to trust herself within reach of me.

I feel like a brigand whenever I look at a woman. If they guessed my true nature ! Even Mrs. Kearness, who has been ever so nice to me lately, would hardly care to stand talking at my gate if she could look into my guilty soul. She is still a very beautiful woman.

I sit glancing at the clock with some irritation. Why can't Tom come home for his dinner ? And when he *does* come, why must he eat as if he had never been in love in his life ?

In the end I roused myself with a growl, and decided to go and meet him. It would pass the time away.

I had hardly got outside the gate, when I heard a

pitter-patter coming behind me, and turned to see, to my astonishment, Dorothea's baby toddling after me. The dear little mite had forgiven me, whatever others had done; she had escaped the tragedy of bed to follow me. I wondered how she had managed it. I caught her up in my arms and hugged her, and told her she had no right to be in the road, and that she ought to let me take her back.

She informed me, however, that she was never going back, never going to bed, and was going to spend the rest of her life riding on my back, and I was to "gee-up" quicker.

I can only say that, as usual, she had her own way.

Just as I had got her properly hoisted on to my back, I caught sight of Tom with Sophonisba and Grace. He was looking rather impatient, and I could understand his feeling that three was one too many. Grace, however, did not look like taking the hint; she kept quite close to him.

Suddenly Tom swung round with Grace and disappeared, leaving me almost face to face with Sophonisba.

For a moment I was puzzled, then I saw his plan, and admired it. He would escort Grace home and leave her there, and then return for Sophonisba. In the meantime he depended upon me to see that Sophonisba was there when he returned.

It seemed to me that—under the circumstances—it was the least I could do. I must keep her, by hook or by crook, until the boy came back proudly to claim her.

But she had already prepared to make a dash for it.

"Oh, *please*," I exclaimed anguished, "if you knew how sorry I was! Oh, Sophonisba, you're not afraid of

me behaving like that again ! You may trust me, you may indeed ! "

She stopped and hesitated, her cheeks flaming.

My voice must have startled her, but then the arms of Dorothea's baby were strangling me, which accounted for much.

" I wouldn't for anything ! " I declared passionately.

Dorothea's baby made an imperious demand that Sophonisba should come closer, and the moment she did so, stretched out her tiny hand and gravely demanded to be shaken hands with—a ceremony we all have to perform a few hundred times a day.

Sophonisba looked at the frail hand lying in hers, and then at her own, spreading it out. " Pretty hefty, isn't it ? " she said, with an odd look at me. " Rather a hard hitter, I'm afraid."

My ear began to blaze. " I—I never felt it," I stammered, " it was quite a butterfly-touch, and far, far less than I deserved ! "

She looked on the ground. " As an uncle ? " she asked demurely.

I went most frightfully red.

" No," I said firmly. " As a *man.*"

Dorothea's baby put out her hand and caught Sophonisba by her honey-coloured curls.

" Me luv 'oo ! " she announced.

" Who could help it ? " I asked despairingly, avoiding Sophonisba's eyes.

" It wasn't as a niece either," said Sophonisba in a sort of desperate way.

After that the conversation stood still between us for so long that I almost prayed for Tom's return.

" Me luv Delly," said Dorothea's baby. " Do 'oo ? "

This was addressed to Sophonisba, and brought the scarlet to both our faces.

" Of course not, baby," I said quickly. " I'm only a silly old fogy, and Sophonisba is young and beautiful. It's youth to youth."

Sophonisba's eyes filled with tears—the child's grasp of her hair was merciless.

" What a long time Tom is ! " I burst out.

" Sorry you think so," said Sophonisba, and tried to release herself from Dorothea's baby, but Dorothea's baby would not let her go. Like children of all ages, she adored Sophonisba.

" I only meant . . . he's a splendid young fellow . . . even though he hardly deserves his luck . . . and I hope you'll be very very happy, Sophonisba ! "

" Oh, talk sense ! " she said impatiently. " What is it to do with me ? "

" But—he—you ? " I began helplessly.

Rather harshly she told the child to let go of her hair. " I don't care for flamboyant young men," she said in a cross tone.

" It's only his waistcoats," I said quickly.

She stamped. " I dislike waistcoats ! " she retorted.

" It will wear off. He is sound at heart. Let go, Dorothea's baby ! "

Dorothea's baby merely laughed and took a firmer grip. She was dragging Sophonisba to her inch by inch.

" He'll grow into the sort of man that stands in front of the fire, keeping it off everybody else, with his legs apart, his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, an' listenin' to the sound of his own voice ! " she snapped.

I saw the danger myself, but I pointed out how it could be averted.

"You can put a stop to it before it starts," I said.

"How do you put a stop to things before they start?" she asked, "and how can I interfere? She thinks him perfect as he is, and wouldn't bother anyway. She isn't that kind. Grace wouldn't thank me if I started trainin' her husband, I can tell you!"

"Grace's husband!" I echoed weakly, "Grace's husband!"

I almost let Dorothea's baby fall.

"Who else's?" she demanded defiantly.

"Then you refused him, and he proposed to Grace?" I was looking at her dazed.

"Who're you gettin' at? He never looked at anybody but Grace. Was it likely? It was all over the minute they met!"

"I thought it was you—he led me to believe it was you!" I stuttered.

"You must have misunderstood. He said you knew it was Grace."

"I was afraid—certain it was you!" was all I could reiterate.

My voice shook in spite of all my efforts to keep it under control.

"You're not very complimentary—afraid it was me," she answered, staring at the ground. "Didn't you want me for a niece, then?"

"Oh, Sophonisba!"

"Wasn't good enough, I suppose?" she went on gruffly.

"Indeed he isn't good enough, nobody is half good enough," I exclaimed. "How could they be when it

was *you!* I was going to give you Moss End and go away!"

"Why . . . go away?" asked Sophonisba in a funny little voice. She locked her hands together. "I've always envied any woman that would have Moss End, and Dorothea to see to things—and——"

"And what?" I asked hoarsely, dizzily.

"Dorothea's baby to play with," she said hurriedly, "and then, of course, there's—there's the garden. I love gardenin'."

"So do I," I stammered.

"And Dorothea's currant scones."

"We have an awful lot of tastes in common," I murmured wildly. "But, of course, I never dared to hope . . . so I was going away because I was a jealous old fool, and could not have borne to see you there with Tom!"

"Tom indeed! A crude boy! He's all right for Grace, she's two years his senior and likes 'em like that now. Give me a man old enough to know his own mind—and stick to it, though not a fat widower, mind you!"

"I'm no longer fat, and I never was a widower," I said huskily. "Sophonisba, oh, Sophonisba? Could you ever?"

Dorothea's baby had one rosy arm round my neck, and another round Sophonisba's; consequently the cheek of my beloved was against mine with its glow of youth, and wealth of tears.

I thrust the baby into Sophonisba's arms, and held the pair of them in mine.

"The moment I saw you! I got queer all over!" I confessed, delirious with incredible happiness.

"And so did I," she whispered, "simply beastly queer. Rum, wasn't it?"

"I've never given a thought to another woman," I went on.

"Nor me," she said, and began to cry, "but I thought bein' so different——"

"I can't believe it!" I gasped. "Oh, Sophonisba, it wasn't as if you had ever helped or prevented me! If only there had been a little hint . . . all this time wasted!"

"Well, it's come off in the end," she breathed thankfully.

As I kissed away her tears, I envied neither Angus nor any man alive. He had his Dorothea, but I had —by some marvellous miracle I could never hope to understand—the most peerless woman that God ever made! My dream, Sophonisba, was my own Sophonisba at last!

Dorothea's baby, however, got suddenly bored with us and our absorbing conversation. She seemed to think she was being neglected, and kicked me in the face to show what she thought about it.

True, Sophonisba and I both kissed her—at the same time and in the same place!—but even that did not entirely content her. She seemed to understand that for once she was not the centre of the universe, and ordered us to take her back to her mother.

It took us some time; but eventually we managed it between us.

I wanted to surprise Dorothea with the amazing news, and I was disappointed at her attitude. She said she had known it all along, and it was about time things were settled.

" Your nose will soon be out of joint, my precious," she said half sadly, half joyfully, pinching her daughter's tiny apology for a nose.

" I hate housekeepin'," burst out Sophonisba. " You'll stay an' have everythin' just the same ? "

Dorothea gave a great sigh of relief. " I will that ! " she exclaimed heartily. " Your servant, miss ! " she dropped a quick, graceful little curtsey.

Then her attitude seemed to change, and she looked at Sophonisba with a laugh in her pretty blue eyes. " Lame dogs," she began, and stopped to toss the baby up in the air.

Sophonisba went her lovely pink. " I didn't ! It wasn't," she said, and added proudly, " he did it all himself ! "

" What do you mean ? " I asked puzzled.

" Proposin'," laughed Sophonisba.

" Oh, was that proposing ? " I asked, astonished.

Dorothea burst out laughing, and fled suddenly from the room, and Sophonisba looked at me reproachfully.

" No, it wasn't," she said, " the fat widower said all the legal things."

Not to be outdone by any fat widower, I there and then said " all the legal things " too, and Sophonisba, as legally, accepted me.

Proposing under such conditions is wholly a pleasure, and quite free from anxiety. I cordially recommend it to all whom it may in any way concern.

CHAPTER XL

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS TO PANSY

THAT evening Tom came home disgracefully late, and very important.

"I'm engaged," he announced proudly.

"So am I!" I returned with as casual an air as possible. I endeavoured to sound quite as if my engagement was an everyday affair.

"Don't rot!" said my nephew, annoyed. "I want to talk about Grace."

"And *I* want to talk about Sophonisba!" I said firmly.

"Why Sophonisba?" He burst out laughing as if it was the hugest joke in the world.

"Because I'm engaged to her," I returned.

Something in my manner must have convinced him, for he sat down suddenly. "Well, I'm—I really *am*!" he gasped. "So you did take my advice! Why the Soapy one though? Wouldn't any of the others have you?"

"Naturally it has always been Sophonisba," I returned. "How could it be any one else? Of course it was awful cheek my falling in love with the flower of the flock, but——"

"Flower of the flock!" he echoed stupidly, then he paused, staring hard at me. "Well, uncle, we'll

leave it at that—bar Grace! Jove, if you ain't in love, and pretty badly, or you—well, of course, I congratulate you; she's a decent little sport, and a jolly lucky girl! I expect you'll hit it off fine. Now I come to think of it it does seem somehow suitable, you're both rum devils in your way, and the same way, by Jove! Now, old chap, what about the mater?"

"What about her?" I echoed faintly.

"She'll have to be told."

"She's not my mother," I said, perhaps a trifle thankfully.

"But she brought you up though, and has managed everything for you ever since. My idea is, you tell her about your show, and give her the first surprise, and I'll come in for the second, see!"

"You mean I am to get the first outbreak, and you the lesser storm?" I returned, eyeing him coldly.

He ruffled his hair. "Well, I dare say something of the sort was in my mind, and you're so much older, and all that; but if you won't be a pal, we'd better both do it together, since we are both jolly well in the cart! Of course, we needn't really mind tuppence, and I don't, save for hurtin' her feelin's, for when all's said and done, we are quite independent. If only the mater was not always right; if things did not conspire to go her way; if she could even make a little mistake! But she's never even lost an umbrella in her life, or made a mis-statement about the weather. When she says 'rain' it rains! and when she says 'fine' it fines! You can't go against a thing like that! If she says, 'You have made a mistake, you won't be happy with Grace,' well, things will pan out so that I shan't!"

"Will she say anything about Sophonisba and me?" I asked with a superstitious shudder.

"You bet she will! Prophesy your sudden death, and Soapy runnin' off with the gardener."

"Thank God I haven't got a gardener!" I gasped out appalled.

"Look here, suppose we compose the letter together, and you copy it."

It fell out, however, that I both composed and copied the letter, but we went together to the post.

"Now for earthquakes!" said Tom as we returned homewards, and lurked outside the Vicarage gate. We had already got through with the parents of our fiancées, and found them so gracious that I took quite a liking to Mr. Kearness, and hope I shall be able to maintain it.

On receipt of the letter, Pansy telegraphed imperiously that we should both meet a certain train.

"The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold!" quoted Tom with a whistle. "I'll see you get to the station in time. No sense in making her more shirty than necessary right off!"

"See me there!" I gasped. "But she said, you too!"

"Sons are different," he said, and went on to explain how he hated kissing people, specially relations and mothers, on the station. He said the porters, who never looked when it was "mothers and things," never did anything but look when it wasn't! He added that he had once seen a girl kiss a porter, whether by mistake or not, or in lieu of tuppence, he did not know, but he had found it a very comforting sight. He went on to say a great number of other inconsequent things,

talking in a jerky manner that was quite unlike his usual assurance.

He did not get as far as the station-gate, objecting that gates were public, too, when you came to think of it, and said he thought he'd wait at the top of the hill.

But when I turned round as I heard a train, he wasn't waiting, but rapidly disappearing from sight.

I realised he had left me alone to face our Waterloo.

Nothing could take my pride or happiness from me, or my determination to marry Sophonisba at the very earliest possible date ; neither could all my happiness prevent me feeling rather like a criminal as I waited the arrival of the omnipotent one.

I resolved that I would discuss Grace rather than Sophonisba. As a mother, the matter of Tom ought to mean more to her, and I should keep her to it as far as possible.

I looked idly at the approaching express, which passed through the station a few minutes before Pansy's train, and watched it slowing up to pass through without much special interest.

But suddenly I became very interested indeed, though I knew it could only be an optical illusion, and not Pansy in the flesh waving wildly from the wrong train ! Both the express and the stopping train left the junction within a short time of each other and were easily mistaken by mortals, but not by Pansys.

So I just grinned at the vision as it was swept towards me.

But the vision had a voice—a voice with something akin to panic in it.

" Edward ! *Edward !* " it called wildly.

I sprinted by her side with remarkable agility.

" Why isn't it stopping ? " she gasped.

" It doesn't stop ! " I tried to throw sorrow into my voice.

" Tell the station-master ! Have it stopped at once ! Say I desire it ! I will pay the charges ! "

I shook my head. " Impossible ! "

" It *can't* be the express ! " she screamed.

" It is ! "

" Where does it go ? "

" Nowhere ! " I panted. I was reaching the end of the long platform. Soon Pansy would be borne right away from me, though where to, only fate could say.

For the first time I saw Pansy with fear on her face. " Nonsense, Edward, *all* expresses stop somewhere ! "

I shook my head.

" Then what *does* it do ? " she demanded hysterically.

" It merely puts its trust in God," I answered softly, and dropped breathless on the nearest seat. The train raced on, really fast, really an express now ! It bore Pansy away to God knows where, the station-master didn't seem to, or at least his explanations were too intricate for me. I had an idea I should never see Pansy again, or if I did, that it could not be quite the same Pansy. Her gods had deserted her, she was no longer omnipotent. She was but a mortal weak woman who had got into the wrong train !

On my return I tapped at Tom's door.

He unlocked it, and put out a cautious head.

" Were is she ? " he whispered. " How is she takin' it ? "

" She's in the express," I said, " the one that hasn't any real destination, you know—at least so I have

gathered! The station-master neither knows nor cares. He just washes his hands of all responsibility."

Tom looked startled, and came out of the room. "But I say! There must be some mistake! Things like that don't happen to mother."

"Yes, it's her mistake!" I chuckled.

He eyed me incredulously.

"I say, but where does the train go!" He got a guide from his writing-table.

"God knows!" I said gravely.

"Oh, it can't be as bad as all that, surely!" He began to look anxious.

I must say her family are extremely devoted to Pansy.

"Ah! Here it is!" his face cleared. "It stops at Bilton Junction about midnight. There's a train to take her back to London at six in the morning, but she won't be able to get here for a day or two, I fancy. Perhaps she will hardly like to come at all now! I say, old sport, this is what I call top-hole!"

Pansy wrote a day or two later, in rather a subdued form, asking us to go and see her and discuss our plans. She added it was going to be fine.

We went, and we arrived in a soaker, and got wet through, because we had trusted in her.

Tom met his father on the steps, and then rushed to me with great excitement, "What do you think, uncle, Ethel's had twins."

"Impossible!" I gasped. "Your mother always said——"

"I know! I say, uncle, it amounts to this—we are saved! We have arrived at the what-d'yer-call-it moment!"

And it really seemed as if we had, for there was no further spirit left in Pansy. She did not make a single disturbing prophecy; I think she realised it would have been no good. Once or twice she seemed about to do something of the sort, but written on Tom's face for all to read, were "express trains," "rain," and "twins." The back of her power was broken, and I think she knew it.

"*All* marriages are arranged in Heaven—and by the woman," she said, "and can't really be helped. I dare say it might have been worse. *All* engagements might have been worse."

Then she kissed us both, and wished us happiness, and said she hoped to goodness our wives would know what treasures they had secured, and be properly grateful, and act accordingly.

"*All* wives try it on at first," she added warningly, "and *all* husbands ought to put their foot down the very second they have said 'I will!' and *keep* it down!"

Then I went and told James all about it, and he said that he was very glad I was going to be married; there was nothing like matrimony.

"What I should have done without Pansy I dare not think," he added gravely, "but, of course, she is quite an exception in every way, a wonderful woman, Edward, a wonderful woman! Look at the way she arranged your marriages now, even to the very sort of wives to suit you! Sometimes it seems almost miraculous—the way things happen as she says and wishes, you know! For instance, only a week or so ago, she said, '*All* twins add distinction to a family,' having no idea Ethel had any expectation of *any* nature—indeed Ethel kept the whole thing dark in a very odd

fashion ! Then we got a telegram to say we are the grand-parents of twins, a fine boy and girl ! I could only gasp and blow like a fish out of water, but Pansy just said :

" I always *knew* Ethel would do something of that sort ! "

" Very wonderful indeed ! " I said gravely.

He laid his hand on my shoulder, " We cannot all hope for a wife like Pansy," he said, " but no doubt we can be quite happy with an ordinary woman. And I wish you all the luck and happiness in the world, old chap ! "

" Thanks ! I've got it ! " I said joyfully.

But imagine speaking of Sophonisba as an ordinary woman ! At that date, however, he had not made her acquaintance.

CHAPTER XLI

THE LAST

I ASKED Sophonisba where she would like to go for a honeymoon.

She said she wouldn't like to go for a honeymoon at all, that people would only "laugh."

My face fell, "Oh, you meant at *me?*" I said.

"No, I didn't! Why should they laugh at *you*—let me catch them at it, that's all! I know too jolly well what they'd laugh at, and I'm not goin' to give 'em the chance! I vote we get accustomed to bein' married for a year or two, and *then* go on a honeymoon. People can't say, 'Oh, come an' *look* at the bride!' then, —an' it isn't so funny when it's a wife."

I said it was the most original and delightful idea in the world, and exactly like Sophonisba.

"Let's start by diggin', an' havin' Dorothea's scones, an' Dorothea's baby to play with, an' Angus' funny stories?" she suggested.

"At Moss End?" I cried joyfully. "Oh, Sophonisba!"

So that was how we started, and I for one doubt if ever there could be a better way. The baby had no objection to adding another devoted admirer to her train, though rather astonished to find that Sophonisba had ideas on the bringing up of babies.

In fact, Sophonisba is the only one who has the nerve to smack the child—and the only one from whom the child will take a smacking !

Dorothea she screams at ; me she kicks ; and Angus she bites, but to Sophonisba she submits with subdued resignation and stoic endurance. Her also she obeys !

* * * * *

I have spoken of one birthday of mine—a day of bitter discontent—when all my expectations were doomed to disappointment, and neither good wishes nor presents came my way.

But how shall I find words to tell of my forty-third birthday ?

For on that day Sophonisba gave her precious self into my keeping—though she said she'd rather not wish me many happy returns of the day if I didn't mind. One never knew ! It might be taken the wrong way by Fate, and it wasn't as if she hadn't known one widower and what they were !

It may seem a long time to wait for a birthday-present—till one is forty-three—but not a day too long, when the present is such a one as I obtained.

Forty-three may indeed be late for love and marriage, but it is not too late, when—at last—after the long and lonely years, Fate sends us the mate intended, and our heart's desire is ours for all the rest of our days.

Somewhere I have seen it written that he who sups late, sups well, and surely of all things this must apply to happiness.

* * * * *

What a wedding ! What a birthday !

When we came home from church, and in at the little gate, I made Sophonisba step on the blazing carpet of crimson and white.

It was quite time, I considered, that the Bachelors' Buttons should realise their long reign was at an end.

They had stared up at me with perky complacent faces for many a long day, but beneath the musical rustle of Sophonisba's wedding-gown, they had to bow their impudent heads, and those on which her dear feet fell, did more than bow them—they never lifted them again.

I had no mercy in my hour of joy and triumph. "I shall dig them all up and plant something else," I said.

"Oh, *why?*" asked Sophonisba.

"I do not consider them suitable for a married man," I said grandly.

Sophonisba laughed with the lilt of a bird singing after rain and, picking a handful, thrust them into her waistband.

On the threshold Dorothea met us, curtseying low. "I wish you happiness, sir," she said to me; and to Sophonisba, "Your servant, Mrs. Delland."

"*Mrs. Delland?*" I echoed the name stupidly.

"Silly!" said Sophonisba, very pink.

I went most frightfully red.

Then Dorothea's baby fell on us, and had to be kissed all round, and congratulated on the glorious event—for she looked upon it as her great day rather than ours. Her next action was to grab the flowers from Sophonisba's waist-belt, and jump on them.

"Nasty fings!" she said contemptuously.

I cannot but think that, when my Bachelors' Buttons found themselves trodden so remorselessly under baby feet, they wilted away in very earnest, realising at length that their power was indeed ended, their long reign over !

FINIS